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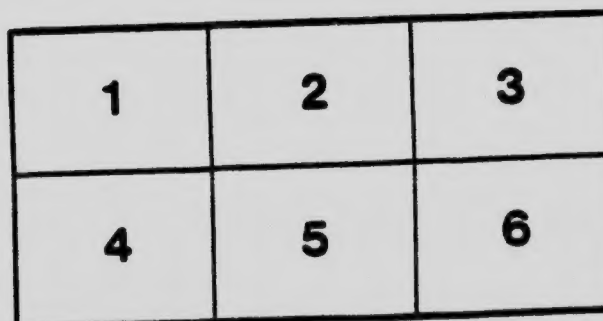
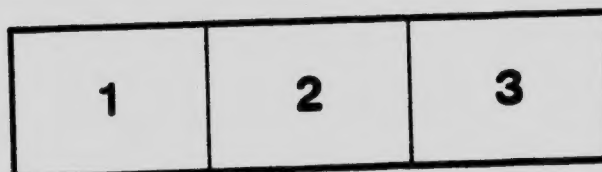
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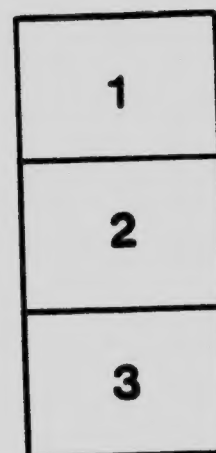
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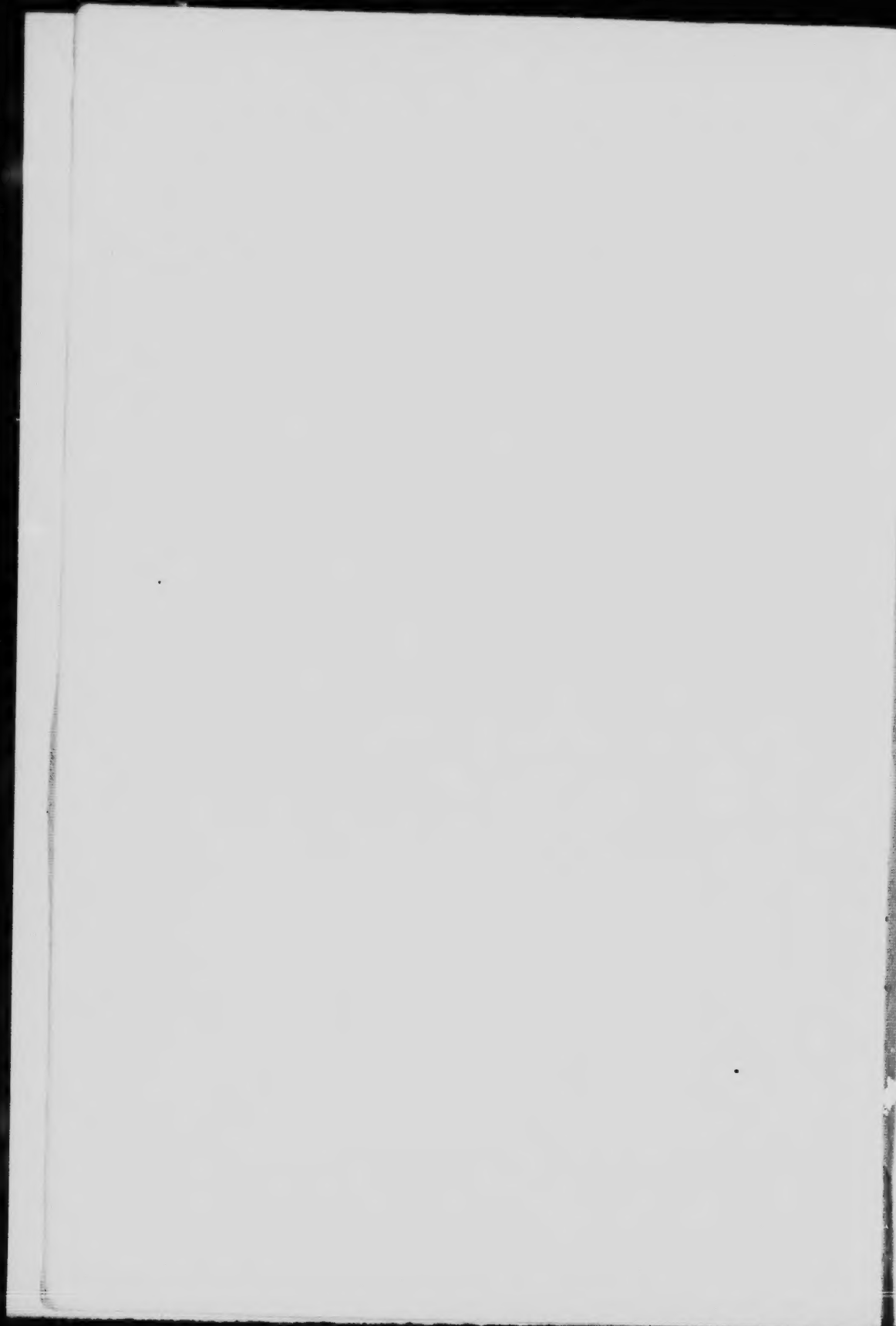


THE CUSTODIAN

ARCHIBALD FYRFE

6009





THE CUSTODIAN.

BY
ARCHIBALD EYRE,

AUTHOR OF "THE TRIFLER."



TORONTO:
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CHAPTER I

THE DUCHESS OF PENDLETON

I WAS born in the lodge that stands just behind the great iron gates that guard the entrance to Pendleton Castle. How often I can remember my mother springing up from her seat and hastening out to fling them open! I, too, would run to the door and shyly watch the grand folk as they rode or drove up the avenue, often receiving a kindly nod as they passed.

They were hardly mortal in my eyes, these grand Castle folk. I can remember even now my surprise when the old Duke died. Once, so my mother told me, when I was still a baby in her arms, he had asked to see me, and my mother had unwrapped the shawls about me and presented my ruddy round face to his Grace's scrutiny.

"A very pretty child," he had said graciously. "I shall watch his career with interest."

This was not a very far-seeing remark, having regard to his early demise, but notwithstanding, my mother's recollection of it was one of her most cherished possessions, and many a time did she repeat it to me. If I grieved her by unsightly stains on my pinafore, I was given to understand that I was also grieving the good Duke in heaven.

After his death, the great house was tenanted for most of the year by the widowed Duchess. She was a tall, almost gigantic woman, with a quick, abrupt manner which was terrifying to people with weak nerves. Sometimes she would call at the lodge, and her stately presence seemed to fill our little sitting-room. She used to ask me questions out of the Church catechism, which I was never able to answer, and she would shake her head at my failure, and suggest the adequate punishment in so deep a voice that my heart was sent quaking to my boots. But she rarely left the cottage without giving me a silver coin for my "missionary box." I used to be terrified lest she should discover I had no missionary box, and make me refund.

The Duchess's younger son, Oswald, had died before his father, and her only surviving son, the new Duke, was unmarried. Nor did he seem in any haste to entangle himself in matrimonial nets. His visits to the Castle

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were not frequent, though I can remember him—a thin, pale-faced, reserved man, whose sphere was the House of Lords, where he occupied appreciable time every Session “explaining his position,” a matter seemingly of not absorbing interest to the political leaders on either side of the House. Besides the Duke, there were three girls, whom I knew well, for my services were often requisitioned to field balls at lawn-tennis, and to carry various odds and ends when they went fishing. Nice, homely young ladies they were, if my memory does not play me false, although rather given to squabbling together, regardless of the little nine-year-old urchin trotting at their heels.

Sometimes, but very seldom, and only when the door was shut and the lamp was lit, and we were cosily seated by the fire, my mother would refer to their dead brother Oswald. A far-away look would come into her eyes, and her hands would clasp and unclasp, as she told me how good he was, and how handsome. The tears would stream down her cheeks until I hated the mention of his name. Even as a child, I wondered.

I have not described my mother. The old Scotch housekeeper at the Castle, who often invited me to take tea in her room, told me she was once “unco’ bonny.” But I remember

her as a little fragile woman, with deep, large dark eyes, and the traces of a former beauty on her tired face, over which I never saw spread the flush of anger or of joy. If she was moved, the hollows of her eyes would darken in the strangest way, but that was seldom. Of her own life's history she never spoke to me; but my firm friend, the housekeeper, told me her uneventful story, so far as she knew it. Once, my mother had been the Duchess's lady's maid, and her father had been the lodge-keeper. Then my mother left the Duchess to take another situation in London; and soon after she married. After a few months of married life her husband died, and she came home to her father. And then I was born. Soon after her father also died, and she took his place as lodge-keeper.

The housekeeper would talk of Oswald without reticence and with even greater volubility—how he was the Duchess's favourite child, and what a dreadful blow it was to her when he died. On the subject of his good looks she was even eloquent. She took me once to the picture gallery and showed me his portrait.

"His eyes," she said, "were much like yours." And then I think the imprudence occurred to her of putting into a child's head

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the idea that even in the colour of his eyes he could hope to vie with the quality, for she added, "But, of course, his were much finer."

One summer day, when I was nearing the completion of my ninth year, I was playing under the shadow of the elm that stood nearest to our cottage. Suddenly I relinquished my game and fled into the house.

"She's coming, mother!" I shouted. "She" could mean but one woman.

My mother whipped off her apron and unrolled her sleeves.

"Go you and wash your face and hands," she commanded, and I slid away to obey her.

While I splashed at the sink, the Duchess's massive form darkened the window, and the next moment I heard her voice in talk with my mother. After an interval I entered the room, with no particular desire to encounter her Grace, but realizing, from past experience, that sometimes there was money in it, I crept in at the door and stood looking at the Duchess, who ignored me completely. As she turned to go, however, she stopped for a moment to pat my head—a heavy pat, more like a cuff, it seemed to me.

"He's getting a big boy," she observed. "I suppose he goes to school?"

"Oh, yes, your Grace," answered my mother.

"And gets on well?"

My mother hesitated. "Yes, your Grace," she replied, fibbing, I fear, for my sake.

"Have you thought to what trade you will put him?" asked the Duchess.

My mother did not answer. I glanced at her with surprise, for I knew the Duchess liked an immediate reply to her slightest question. But my mother continued silent, and then I saw her commence to clasp and unclasp her hands, a common trick of hers when agitated. The Duchess was a woman of quick perceptions. She raised her glasses to her eyes.

"What, what?" she asked in her peremptory manner.

"I—I don't want him to be put to any trade," my mother replied at last.

"What then?" asked the Duchess.

"I want him to be a——"

"Well, speak out. Is the woman dumb-struck? You want him to be a——"

"A gentleman!" whispered my mother, very dark about the eyes.

The Duchess was taken aback. "A gentleman!" she echoed. "And what do you mean by that? A clerk in an office? Tut, tut, much better make him a carpenter."

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My mother shook her head. "I want him to be a gentleman like his father."

"Was his father a gentleman?" queried the Duchess.

"Yes, oh yes."

"What was he?" asked the Duchess.

"He was a lieutenant in the 7th Lancers."

The Duchess started. "I never knew that before," she said. "The 7th Lancers! That was my son's regiment." She sat down and draped her voluminous skirts around her.

"Your husband left you quite unprovided for, did he not?" she asked.

"He died so unexpectedly. He intended to provide for me, but — but there was no time."

"Why didn't you apply to his relations?"

My mother shook her head.

"Come, come, what folly is this?" exclaimed the Duchess. "Tell me all about it at once. No mystery, please. Who was this husband of yours?"

My mother opened her mouth to speak, and shut it again without uttering a word.

"Did your husband's relatives approve of his marriage?" asked the Duchess sharply.

My mother's agitation was painful to witness. She tried to speak, but the words would not come.

"No," she whispered at length.

The Duchess looked at her steadily. The clock seemed to commence ticking.

"Was there a marriage to approve of?" she asked abruptly.

My mother began to cry. A frozen look came over the Duchess's face. She sat still for several moments, regarding my mother with stony eyes, and then she rose and swept towards the door.

"I am shocked," she said. "I never guessed this, or——" She stopped suddenly, for I think the agony on my mother's face touched her. She came slowly back to her former seat.

"Why did you tell me this?" she asked not unkindly.

"My boy!" sobbed my mother.

"Well, well!" said the Duchess. "And the man—you say he is dead?"

"He was so good, so kind. He loved me so," wept my mother. "And then he died! So I came home. I never told anyone."

"That was wrong," said the Duchess. "Possibly his relations would have deemed it their duty to make some provision for the child."

My mother raised her tear-stained face.

"Do you think so?" she asked eagerly.

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"Of course, I can't say," replied the Duchess. "It would have been their duty to do so. Let me have his name, and I will make some inquiries. Have you any letters or anything else which will corroborate your story?"

With a look of something like fear, my mother went slowly to the chest of drawers that stood in a corner of the room and unlocked one of the upper drawers. She drew forth a packet of letters tied with blue ribbon and brought it to the Duchess.

"Am I to look at these? I am not sure I care to."

"Yes, yes," implored my mother, still with the frightened look in her eyes.

So the Duchess unfastened the packet, took the top letter into her hands, and unfolded it. The others lay on her lap. When her glance fell on the handwriting she sprang to her feet with a cry, and the letters were scattered on the red-brick floor. My mother retreated a step or two, and put up her hands as if to ward off a blow.

"You lie!" cried the Duchess, though my mother had not spoken a word.

"It's the truth," wept my mother, hiding her face in her apron.

"How dare you——" thundered the Duchess. She stopped short suddenly, and

sitting down began to read the letter which she still held in her hand.

"I don't believe it!" she cried, as she turned the page. "Nothing will induce me to believe it." But her face had aged suddenly.

"No one knew," sobbed my mother; "not even father."

"You went up to London to take a situation," said the Duchess scornfully. "There was no situation."

"N—no, your Grace."

"You went to——" she gulped something down—"to my son, Oswald?"

"Yes."

"How long did you live with him?"

My mother sobbed with renewed violence.

"Only a few months."

"And then——?"

"He died."

Both women were silent, and I imagine a slight feeling of pity stirred in the Duchess's heart.

"How could he?" she murmured. "How could you?" she added, with much greater sternness.

"I loved him," said my mother, almost defiantly.

The Duchess rose hastily. "The boy!" she said quickly. "Where is the boy?"

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My mother looked round dazedly, for I had retired into the adjoining room. She came unsteadily to me. I could understand little of what I had heard, and my brain was in a whirl.

"Come, dearie," my mother said. "She wants you."

"What is the matter?" I asked. "Is she angry?"

"Be a good boy," my mother whispered in my ear as she arranged my hair with deft fingers. "And you must love her very much."

My jaw dropped. Fancy loving the Duchess!

We went into the room together. To my astonishment, the great lady was kneeling on the floor, picking up the scattered letters. My mother ran to her with a cry.

"There, there," said the Duchess, getting up with more agility than I could have imagined possible. "Take 'em and put 'em away. Best burn them, I should say."

My mother uttered a little inarticulate cry of protest, and the Duchess regarded her more sympathetically.

"We're silly creatures, we women," she said softly. "And this is Oswald's son? God bless me!" She drew me towards her, and putting a hand on either side of my

face, looked long and steadily into my eyes.

"Tut, tut," she said, and pushed me away a little roughly. "What do you call him?"

"Oswald," replied my mother, prepared, as I could see, to re-start whimpering.

"He's like his father," the Duchess observed thoughtfully. "I can't understand why I never saw the likeness before. His eyes——" She was silent, and stood looking at me perplexedly.

"When he is grown up," said my mother proudly, "he will be the image of his father."

"Stuff and nonsense," snapped the Duchess. But she stood and looked at me with a puzzled expression. "Others may guess," she said at length. "He'd better go away. I can't have any scandal."

"Then I'll go away with him," cried my mother, tearfully.

"Absurd!" said the Duchess. "He'll go to school."

"A gentleman's school?" asked my mother eagerly, with a sudden light in her eyes.

The Duchess nodded. "Yes. Why not?"

My mother clasped her hands. "Oh, how I thank your Grace!"

The Duchess made for the door. "It's a miserable business," she said. "and I

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suppose I must make the best of it. But it's a blow to me, a very great blow."

She disappeared. I remember that during the next hour I grew weary of my mother's kisses.

CHAPTER II

NOT A HERO

THE events of the next twelve years of my life may be dismissed in a few words. Within a few weeks of my mother's interview with the Duchess I was sent to a school in the environs of Paris. My poor mother died within six months of my leaving her. One of the very few letters the Duchess ever wrote me contained the news. It was a kind, womanly letter, showing the softer side of her character, a side which some did not give her the credit of possessing. My grief was very intense, but it soon faded away, as a child's sorrow will, amidst new scenes and faces.

After I had been at this school for a little over three years, I was suddenly removed to another school at Heidelberg, and here I was destined to remain nearly six years. During these nine years I never once visited Eng-

land, nor did I have a visit from the Duchess or from anyone representing her. My holidays were spent at the school or with one of the tutors. It is true that I was liberally supplied with pocket-money, and that any privileges which could be obtained by cash payments were mine; but the feeling of loneliness deepened as I grew older, and I began to compare my position with the happier lot of my companions.

Just about the time I had attained my eighteenth year I received a letter from the Duchess. It was a curt letter, beginning "Dear Oswald," and concluding "Yours truly." She asked me in a single sentence if I had formed any views as to my future career. In a postscript she added, "Would you like to go to Oxford?"

I remember my answer, or rather my answers, for I wrote many before I could decide on one. I wrote letters of indignant remonstrance, of pathetic appeal; I wrote sarcastic letters, indifferent letters. It was at a time when my feeling of isolation was very keen. Most of my friends and companions had left school in the usual course of events, and yet I remained alone and without a word or a sign to indicate what was to become of me. The letter I finally despatched was as curt as the one I had received, and couched

in very nearly the same phraseology. I wrote :—

“MADAME,—I have formed no views as to my future career.

Yours truly,

OSWALD CHAPMAN.

P.S.—I should like to go to Oxford.”

Three months passed without anything further happening. One day, at the end of this period, the Head-master sent for me and told me I was to return to England at once.

“Where am I to go?” I asked with curiosity.

He referred to a letter on his desk.

“Your name at the great Oxford University has been entered,” he replied in English, which he spoke without fluency.

“Do I go straight there?”

“Ah, no. It is to 192, Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, in London, that you must go.”

“Is that where the Duchess of Pendleton lives?”

He shook his head. “There resides her man of business, her solicitor and commissioner for oaths.”

I parted from Heidelberg with little regret. Though my time there had been in a sense

happy enough, I had outgrown school life. It was with a feeling of relief I started for my native land.

I remember vividly my arrival in London, late in the night. Putting all my belongings into a four-wheel cab, I directed the driver to take me to Lincoln's-Inn-Fields. Of course, I found the solicitor's office dark and desolate. I cannot recall my interview with the caretaker, whom I routed out of bed, without amusement. Her ridiculous night-cap, and the policeman who stood and listened, but never spoke, are before me as I write. The woman was indignant at being disturbed, astounded that I should believe her employer was to be found at that hour on his business premises, and aghast at my helpless suggestion that she should find house room for me. And I, a stranger in a strange city, and entirely ignorant of the world and its ways, felt as if I was the victim of some cruel practical joke.

"Where shall I go?" I asked the policeman distractedly; who shook his head gloomily, but answered never a word.

"I'm catching my death," lamented the caretaker.

"Why don't you go to a hotel?" bawled the cabman from the box of his cab. I had not thought of that.

I plunged back into the cab. "To a hotel!" I cried. As the cab moved off, I put my head out of the window. "It's a beastly shame!" I shouted to the policeman.

The next morning I was again at 192, Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, and saw Mr. Parsons, her Grace's solicitor.

"I understand you called here last night," he said smiling, as we shook hands.

"I thought I had to," I answered.

"My mistake," he said. "I should have explained more fully in my letter. But I thought you would have understood."

"I never saw your letter."

"Well, well." And he put the matter aside with a wave of his hand. "The Duchess has entered your name at Oxford. She wishes you to go up as soon as possible."

"Very well," I assented.

"All business matters," he went on, "will pass through my hands. It is her Grace's wish that you should not approach her on monetary matters."

I flushed angrily. "I have no desire to approach her Grace on any matter whatever."

My tone made him wrinkle his brow.

"I suppose you realize," he said frigidly

"that you are entirely dependent upon the Duchess of Pendleton's——" He stopped short.

"On her bounty, you were about to say?" I returned with bitterness. "Yes, I know that."

He seemed annoyed with me. "In such circumstances," he remarked, "a little gratitude would not be out of place."

"I am grateful," I replied defiantly. "No, I am not. Why should I pretend I am? Why does she treat me so coldly? If she looks upon me as an encumbrance, why didn't she leave me where she found me, to worry out my own future as best I could?"

He regarded me with a good deal of severity. "The Duchess," he said, "takes an interest in your welfare, and wishes to help you."

"But she doesn't wish to see me," I replied, resentfully.

"Why should she wish to see you?"

"Why indeed?" I answered.

He rose and stood with his back to the fireplace. "You may take it from me that you are a distant connection of the Duchess. I cannot tell you more."

"I know more," I said bitterly. "I know my father was her son, and that he did not marry my mother."

"You know that?" he asked quickly.

"I overheard a conversation between my mother and the Duchess, years ago. As a child I did not fully understand. But, of course, I understand now."

"I hope you have not mentioned this to any one."

"Of course not. My own knowledge is shame enough. It will not lessen it to tell others."

"Tell no one," he said kindly enough. "The fault is not yours, but the world does not discriminate."

I was silent for a moment. "You cannot understand," I began again, "how galling it is to have money flung to you from an unseen hand. No, I cannot be grateful."

"You would rather," said Mr. Parsons, "have been left with your mother's people, to have been brought up on their level?"

I did not answer.

"The Duchess," he went on, "promised your mother to give you a gentleman's education. I am sorry you resent her efforts to carry out her promise."

"But I don't!" I cried. "I assure you I am grateful."

"You said a moment ago you were not."

"Neither I am. Oh, I don't know what I mean."

"It would be as well if you were to consider your meaning more carefully before you attempt to express it in words." His cold, lawyer-like tone had a sobering effect.

"I think I could explain in German," I said sadly. "But after all, perhaps you wouldn't understand."

"I should certainly not understand if you explained in German."

"Don't you see," I went on desperately, "that the present position is hardly consistent with my self-respect?"

"No, I don't see that."

"I can't bear," I cried vehemently, "to be an unwelcome hanger-on of a ducal family. I want to manage for myself. I am ashamed to accept any one's bounty."

"I see no reason why you should accept it if you don't want to."

"But how otherwise can I live?"

"That, of course, will be a point for your consideration."

"I don't know what I ought to do," I cried.

He smiled in a restrained way. "I think I understand you," he said, not unkindly. "On the one hand, you have a feeling of pride which makes you desire to decline her Grace's aid."

"True."

"On the other hand, you have ambitions. You do not wish to return to that class for which your education has unfitted you."

"That is so."

"It seems to me," he said judicially, "that you must either pocket your pride—as you have done for nearly nine years—or you must act the part of a hero of romance!"

"And what would you advise?"

"The former course, assuredly. The world has no use for heroes of romance."

I thought over his words. "I wish," I said, "I was either more or less of a hero."

He smiled grimly. "I think you are well enough as you are. To my mind it is enough to be an honest man."

"But why," I asked, running off at a tangent, "cannot the Duchess treat me with a little human kindness? Is she afraid I shall sponge on her?"

"She does not fear that," he answered.

"She is rather hard-hearted. Why couldn't she just——?"

He interrupted me a little impatiently. "You cannot expect her Grace to receive with effusion the child born of an irregular connection between her son and her servant."

I winced. For the first time my relations with the Duchess, from the point of view of the outside world, came home to me. "I

suppose not," I replied, with a sudden depression.

"She feels she has a duty towards you, to educate and maintain you till you are able to provide for yourself. She does not deem that it goes further."

"It shall not go further," I declared resolutely.

"She has instructed me to pay you three hundred pounds per annum for the next five years, and each year afterwards fifty pounds less. In eleven years her aid will entirely cease. By that time she thinks you should be in a position to earn your own living."

"Her offer is very generous," I said. "My only hope is that long before then I shall be in a position to dispense with her help."

"I trust you may."

I rose. "Good-day, Mr. Parsons," I said, "and many thanks for your advice."

He proffered his hand, which I took.

"You will leave for Oxford on Wednesday, will you not?"

I assented.

"In the meantime," he went on with some hesitation, "it is clearly understood you will not—"

"Will not what?"

"The Duchess is seldom at home," he said meaningly.

I seized my hat with sudden anger. "You may take it for certain that I will not importune her Grace's footmen," I said haughtily, and went away with my chin high in the air.

CHAPTER III

THE COUNT

I WENT up to Oxford, and I remained there for the following three years. My career at the University does not require many words. I took a respectable degree, and did not run into debt. The only distinction which I can claim is that in my last year I played for Oxford against Cambridge. I would not mention this if the fact had not had a bearing on my after life.

It was a few days after the 'Varsity match at Lord's that I received, enclosed in a note from Mr. Parsons, a letter from the Duchess asking me to call. It was a brief note, almost curt, beginning "Dear Oswald," and ending "Yours truly," as in her previous communications. I did not reply to it, but at the hour named I presented myself at her town house.

I was faint-hearted when the footman showed me into the immense drawing-room,

and my nervousness increased each minute I had to wait. When at length the door opened and I saw the Duchess's massive form in the doorway, I pulled myself together resolutely, determining to hide my tremors. She stood with her hand on the knob for a few seconds, regarding me silently. It seemed to me a long time before she spoke.

"Well, Oswald, how are you?" she said. She came slowly towards me, and when close, she held out her hand. Her eyes were on my face. She had not altered much; her hair was whiter than in my recollection of her, and she seemed perhaps a little stouter. She held my hand for some time.

"You are like—so like your father," she said at length, and I am certain the tears sprang to her eyes. "You are surprised, are you not," she went on, "that I have sent for you?"

"I am rather surprised," I admitted.

She nodded gravely. "It was a foolish thing to do."

"Why?" I asked.

"It may raise expectations in your mind that I cannot fulfil."

I bit my lips. "I expect nothing from your Grace. You have been sufficiently generous already."

"I have done all that duty required," she

answered in a matter-of-fact tone. "It would have been wiser not to have sent for you."

"Why, then, did you ask me to call?" I said abruptly.

"Sentiment—pure sentiment," she rapped out. "I have fought against it all my life, and now that I have become an old woman it is too strong for me."

"I am afraid I don't understand," I said stiffly.

"What are you to me?" she asked. "Nothing."

"I am content," I said, diving for my hat.

"Sit down," she commanded, and I sat down. She also seated herself, jerking a cushion from behind her.

"Bah!" said she, with contempt of herself, or me, or the cushion. For some moments we sat in silence.

"You have not told me," I said impatiently, for the situation was irksome, "why you have sent for me."

She looked up quickly. "I have sent for you, Oswald, because I loved your father. He was not a credit to me, but it is he who has ever been in my mind both day and night through all these weary years. I loved him, Oswald, I loved your father."

She spoke with sudden emotion, and I

studied the floor, not knowing what to say.

"Of course, it is sentimentality," she went on, "which makes me think of the dead rather than the living. I have children and grandchildren in abundance, all alive and highly respectable. Yet my son--my wayward son, who died at your age, Oswald, is always in my thoughts."

I continued my study of the *parqueterie*, greatly embarrassed.

"I went with some of my grandchildren to a cricket match the other day. Do you think I take an interest in cricket? But Oswald played it, and I like to sit and think I see him still. Last Friday someone hit the ball almost to my feet. An excited young man, all legs and arms, came tearing after it, and for a moment his face was turned towards me. It was my boy, Oswald!"

She stopped suddenly, and wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. "Yes," she continued, "it was Oswald come back, Oswald as I knew him, as your mother knew him. I expected him to catch my eye and smile, and I think I cried to him, but he went on with his game, never thinking of his mother sitting there--his mother who had loved him so much, and whose heart he had nearly broken."

I felt I ought to murmur something soothing, but I could think of nothing to say. I began to fear that age had affected her intellect.

"Of course," she went on with sudden briskness, "I soon understood. I knew, without looking at the card in my hand, that it was Oswald's son whom I had seen. I had not to see your name as a player to guess that."

"My name?" I exclaimed involuntarily.

"Yes," she said. "You are the image of your father. It may seem absurd that your resemblance to one who has been dead over twenty years should work a change in my mind. It was my intention to do my duty by you, my duty and perhaps a little over. But, Oswald, all that has changed. I had intended we should never meet, but now I want to see you often. I had intended you should fight your own battles, but now I am willing to fight them with you and for you. And all this" — she spoke with sudden scorn — "because I am a sentimental old woman."

"Really," I began, with hesitation, "I am afraid I don't quite understand——"

"Of course you don't," she made answer. "Nor would any other rational being. But the sum of it is that I am no longer actuated

merely by a sense of duty, and it makes all the difference."

"What difference?" I asked in my confusion, and blushed lest she should fancy I was thinking of its money value.

She rose with an effort and came to my side, and placed her heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Oswald," she said in her deep voice, "for your father's sake, I would gladly bear a mother's part."

Her great weight seemed to be resting on my shoulder. I struggled to my feet, half scared. She put one hand on each of my shoulders and stared into my eyes till I lost countenance. Then she enfolded me in her arms, kissing me on the forehead. I stood like a block, painfully conscious that her cameo brooch was hurting my nose, and longing to escape. While we stood thus, the door of the room opened. The Duchess's hearing was perhaps not very acute, for she remained with her arms round my neck. But I, sensible of the open door, twisted my head towards it, to see the astonished face of a servant, and behind him a little, quaint old man, fumbling for his *pince-nez*.

For some moments I stood regarding them with my neck awry, while the Duchess continued to press me to her bosom. My uneasy movements at length caused her to relinquish

her hold, and at the same moment the footman, prompted by the little old gentleman, announced him in a stentorian voice—

“The Count Darnsdorf.”

The Duchess turned with a start, and her eyes flashed fire at the unfortunate servant.

“Did I not tell you I was engaged?” she began angrily, but recovered herself instantly. “But you did quite right, for I am always at home to the Count.”

She advanced to meet him, and he came forward with a mincing, artificial gait, and bowed over her hand with all the airs of a French dancing-master.

“One word from you,” he said, “and I vanish. I fear I have chosen an inconvenient moment.”

“On the contrary,” said the Duchess, “you have chosen a peculiarly fortunate moment, for I am most anxious to introduce you to——” she stopped till the door had closed on the servant—“my grandson.”

“Ah, indeed,” said he, and shook me warmly by the hand. “I already have the great honour of knowing your reverend father.”

I looked surprised, and the Duchess frowned.

“You are making a mistake, Count,” she said quickly.

"A thousand pardons, but is he not a son of the Bishop?"

"No, no." She hesitated a moment, and then turned to me with a twinkle in her eye. "The Bishop the Count speaks of is my son-in-law. He married my daughter Cecilia. You remember Cecilia?"

"Yes," I said, guessing she was one of the girls at whose beck and call I used to run in the days of my childhood.

She turned to the Count. "This is Mr. Oswald Chapman. He is the son of my boy Oswald. I do not think you knew Oswald. He died many years ago."

"I did not know you had a married son," said the Count. "I thought——"

She made a little gesture of impatience. "I must explain the circumstances to you another time, Count." And then, as if she feared I might be hurt by what had passed, she slipped her arm through mine with a protecting air. "We were just about to discuss an important matter about Oswald's future. He has just left Oxford, where he greatly distinguished himself. Did you not, Oswald?"

I smiled rather foolishly.

"At any rate at cricket. And now we have to settle what he is to do. He has spent many years abroad, and can speak German and French like a native."

The Count regarded me attentively. "A native of where?" he asked.

"Like two natives," amended the Duchess. "One of Germany and the other of France."

"Languages are useful acquisitions," agreed the Count. He put his stick and hat on a chair and looked at me musingly.

"It is necessary he should work for his living?" he asked.

"Yes," said the Duchess with decision.

I think the Count had surmised the facts of the case, so far as my parentage was concerned. The dissimilarity of my surname from the family name of my father must have occurred to him.

"And he has formed no decision as to his future vocation?"

"None," replied the Duchess.

He seemed to be turning something over in his mind. "It would be strange, wouldn't it, Duchess, if I could make him an offer of employment?"

"It would be very welcome," said the Duchess.

"And yet I do not know——"

"What is it you do not know?"

"Perhaps I have spoken too hastily. It is a secretary I require, one who can help me in the delicate matter which has brought me to England. On the one hand, your —

your young friend may disdain my modest proposals."

"He will disdain nothing," responded the Duchess.

"On the other hand, my assistant requires certain qualities which I have no means of judging if Mr. Chapman possesses. You and I, Duchess, must discuss the matter together."

I took this as a hint and rose. The Duchess held out her hand, and I took it. Then, as if by a sudden impulse, she drew me towards her and kissed me again.

"Good bye, my dear boy," she said, and I was touched by the emotion in her voice.

I shook hands with the Count, and was making my way to the door when she spoke.

"Oswald," she said, "I go down to Pendleton Castle on Monday. I should like you to visit me there for a few days."

I thanked her.

"I will write you as to this." She glanced towards the Count. "Perhaps the Count may be there, and if so——"

"I may find a secretary," said the Count smiling.

CHAPTER IV

PENDLETON CASTLE AGAIN

A FEW days later I received a note from the Duchess desiring me to be at Pendleton Castle on the following Thursday, and giving me the hour of the train by which she wished me to arrive. It was a cordial little note, beginning "My dearest Oswald." I spent a sleepless night before I penned a reply. I had every intention of accepting her invitation, but I could not make up my mind how to commence the letter. To begin coldly "Madame," or "Dear Madame," to a Duchess and a grandmother who had signified her relationship by hugging and kissing me, seemed to my sensitive mind altogether inadequate. To write "Dear Grandmother," was too rapid a coming on. "Your Grace" or "My dear Duchess" were both expressions which did not commend themselves. It is little difficulties like these that cause perplexity to youth.

However, I wrote the letter of acceptance and posted it, and when the day arrived, I nearly lost my train from indecision as to the class by which to travel. The Duchess made me an allowance—not a large one, as the reader knows. Would she think me unduly extravagant if I travelled first-class? If I travelled third, would not her Grace's flunkeys despise me? I remember I finally compromised the matter by travelling first-class with a third-class ticket, and passed the journey in an agony of apprehension lest the authorities should detect the fraud and arrest me—a deplorable commencement to a first visit to a Duchess.

When the train drew up at the little station of Pendleton, the first figure I saw on the platform was that of the Duchess. I opened the door, and a footman sprang in and collected my baggage. I was glad I was not in a third-class carriage. The Duchess shook me by the hand, for which I was grateful, fearing an embrace. She led the way to her carriage and I followed, the station-master personally conducting us. I was not asked for my ticket, for which I had a third cause for gratitude.

"It was kind of you to come to the station," I said, when we were ensconced in the carriage.

"I wanted to see you before we got to the house," she said. "I was particularly anxious you shouldn't say anything silly."

She really had the knack of being rude.

"I am not in the habit of being silly," I replied with hauteur.

She gave me a quick look. "You'll get used to my ways by and by. But, seriously, I wanted to warn you not to allude to your connection with our family."

"I am not likely to brag of the relationship," I said a little bitterly.

She patted my hand soothingly. "There, there, my dear boy, we'll not mention the matter again. Of course, I have had to explain the facts to the Count——"

"I hardly see the necessity."

"My dear Oswald, I really cannot embrace strange young men without a word of explanation. As it has turned out, it was singularly lucky the Count appeared at that awkward moment. I feel sure he will accept you as his secretary, provided, of course, you don't betray too obvious signs of incapacity."

"I must try not to reveal my mental defects until the contract is signed," I said moodily.

"It will be the making of you, Oswald," said the Duchess fondly. "It is a most fortunate opening."

"Who is the Count?" I asked.

For some moments she did not answer, and I thought she had not heard the question. "The Count Darnsdorf," she said at length, "is quite a great man on a minor scale. He is the chief minister of the Grand Duke of Saxe-Cassel. When I was young and very foolish, he was young and very wise, and we became fast friends. We have been friends ever since. He is now an old man, and I am an old woman, and our friendship will last to the end."

There arose before my eyes the figure of the little smirking dancing master, a strange contrast to the majestic Duchess, and I thought it a strange conjunction.

"You will never come across a more sagacious man than Count Darnsdorf in all your journey through life," she went on. "If Providence had given him a larger sphere, his name would have been a household word. As it is, hereditary ties have chained him to the side of a petty Grand Duke, and the Count's life has been spent in directing and controlling a duchy, the name of which you have probably never before heard."

"Oh, yes, I have," I answered. "You forget I lived in Germany for six years. The Grand Duke of Saxe-Cassel is reputed to be the wealthiest man in Germany."

She nodded quickly. "It is the Count who has given him his wealth. The Duke was comparatively a poor man thirty years ago. All the great manufactures that have sprung up in Cassel originated in the Count's brain. It is strange that an unbroken line of aristocrats should evolve a shrewd commercial business man, and stranger still, one willing to devote his faculties unselfishly to the service of his master."

"Of course, I know what an important lucky Saxe-Cassel is. The Duke is an invalid, isn't he?"

"Yes. Wisely enough, he has entrusted the reins of government unreservedly to the Count, and it is of little consequence to the State whether the Duke is well or ill."

"Is the Count staying at the Castle?" I asked.

"He came a few days ago. That is why I sent for you. He said he would be glad to see you again. I think I am entitled to infer from this that he has decided to take you into his employment."

It seemed a somewhat slight foundation on which to build, and perhaps my face fell.

"You must not be disappointed if I am mistaken," she said, "or if he changes his mind. I don't know what has brought him to England, unless it is his usual errand."

"What is that?"

She laughed. "He usually comes when he wants to extract money from the pocket of the British investor. You haven't any money to invest, have you, Oswald?"

"No," I said, rather vexed at the irony of the question.

"The Count usually tells me when he has a good thing to offer," observed the Duchess.

"Well," said I disinterestedly, "I hope he has a good thing this time."

The Duchess shrugged her shoulders. "The Count does not hold a brief for the British capitalist. But you may be sure he has the interest of the duchy at heart."

"Do you think I shall have to go to Germany?" I asked.

"I suppose so. I rather hope he will take you out of England. You have a most inconvenient resemblance to some of our family portraits."

"I am quite willing to leave England," I answered, a little hurt at her desire to be rid of me. I was young and absurdly sensitive. "There is no one I care for here—except yourself," I added with sudden politeness.

She smiled. "You are not in love with any one in England then?"

"I am not in love with any one," I said, flushing, for I was at that susceptible age

when most women are fit objects of adoration. "Not—not at the moment."

She looked at me kindly. "We must try and find you a nice little wife later on."

"Oh, pray don't trouble," I replied bashfully.

"Ah, well, perhaps you are still too young. Don't fall in love with the Princess Isa."

"Who is she?"

"The Grand Duke's only daughter. By the way, I understand her marriage is fixed for this month, so there will be no danger in that quarter."

The carriage had entered the Avenue, and I put my head to the window. With painfully mixed feelings, I saw again the little cottage in which my mother and I had lived. I realized with surprise how vivid my recollections were. I knew where the little pathway went which ran through the elms; I knew where the ducks, waddling through the grass, found water; every little detail came back to me distinctly. I felt my cheeks burn. The Duchess's eyes were on me, and she put out her hand; but I disregarded it.

"Oswald, you are young yet."

I made no answer.

"When you are as old as I am you will understand that most things which men value are insignificant."

I did not catch her meaning. "What is insignificant?"

"The things we call rank and birth and fortune. The contempt or the admiration of our fellows."

I roused myself. "I am entirely indifferent to all these things."

She smiled in her kindly way. "You are fortunate then. All my life I have tried to be superior to them, but I have never succeeded. I realize their worthlessness, but am still their slave."

The carriage had stopped. I sprang out and helped the Duchess to alight.

"Welcome to Pendleton Castle," she said. "Ah, there is the Count. Now do try to make a good impression."

CHAPTER V

THE GRAND DUKE'S FAMILY AFFAIRS

I WAS perfectly ready and willing to impress the Count. As I dressed for dinner, I considered what demeanour I should adopt to this end, very much as a woman might run her eye over her wardrobe. It is probably quite common for young men to deliberate whether a gentle melancholy or a humorous vivacity suits them best. I decided finally to be calm and cold, with just a slight tinge of cynicism, varied by an occasional flash of wit, revealing a profound insight into human nature. I rather regretted, as I tied my bow, that my face was not haggard. A cheerful boyish countenance and a cynical manner did not seem to go well together. However, I was resolved to show the Count clearly that I was a polished, self-possessed man of the world.

Unfortunately for my intention, we had not long taken our seats at the dinner table

when I upset a claret glass and flooded the tablecloth with wine. My self-possession and my cynicism alike vanished in blushing confusion and incoherent apologies. The Duchess was extremely kind, and did all she could to make me feel at ease, but I had an unpleasant feeling that the Count was watching me with a constantly growing consternation. "Good Heavens, what an escape!" I imagined he was saying to himself. "Fancy having this booby for a secretary!"

We finished dinner at length. The conversation had consisted chiefly of reminiscences of people dead and buried before I was born. Sometimes when the talk promised to grow interesting and the details to become human, the Duchess would wag her forefinger warningly.

"We must not forget Oswald is present," she would say. I thought her conduct ungrandmotherly.

"I hope you are not going to send a poor old woman to solitude," she said, addressing me directly when the coffee was on the table and the servants had withdrawn. "I don't object to your smoking, and I don't see why you should object to my presence."

"I don't," I protested. "I hope you won't go away. I should much prefer you to stay."

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"You are afraid the Count will bore you?" she asked with anxiety.

"I don't mean anything of the kind," I cried, flung into confusion.

The Count smiled, as he offered his cigar-case. "I am glad Oswald has permitted you to remain," he said, "because I want to tell you why I have come to England."

"I hope you will let me have a marked prospectus," observed the Duchess.

"Ah, no," replied the Count. "I have not this time come to gladden the British speculator. Alas, it is private business of a particularly difficult and unpleasant kind."

The Duchess tilted the red shade of the lamp so that the light fell on the Count's face.

"And you are going to tell Oswald and myself?"

"You, because I want your advice, and Oswald, because I need his aid." He readjusted the shade, smiling at the same time towards the Duchess.

"Oswald will make an excellent secretary," said the Duchess, without any sign of embarrassment. "He is very clever and trustworthy."

"Oswald will, I think, serve my purpose excellently," he acquiesced. "I have no doubt he is most—trustworthy."

I wish he had admitted my cleverness. But when one upsets claret and relapses into a gloomy silence, what can one expect ?

"I am so glad," said the Duchess. My hand lay on the table ; she covered it with hers and pressed it gently.

"You know, of course," continued the Count, addressing the Duchess but looking at me, "that the Grand Duke has two children. The elder is a girl of nineteen and the younger a boy barely sixteen. Perhaps you may have noticed that on the twenty-sixth of this month the marriage of the princess to the Duke of Hanau was fixed to take place. It would have been a most suitable match."

"Except, possibly, on the score of age," murmured the Duchess.

The Count tapped the table with some impatience. "The Duke is in the prime of manhood. He is twenty years younger than I am."

"You and I, Count," remarked the Duchess, "were born in the same year."

"You prove the Duke's youth," said the Count gallantly.

The Duchess sighed. "My youngest grand-child, on my last birthday, presented me with a pincushion, on which the figures seventy were elegantly traced in pins. She has all her mother's tact."

The Count pursued his subject. "In every respect was the marriage a desirable one. It was projected at my suggestion. I wish there was nothing I regret more."

"Well?"

"The marriage has been relinquished. Can you guess why?"

"I saw a paragraph in a newspaper which explained the postponement on the ground of the Princess's indisposition."

"That is perfectly true."

"I hope her illness is not serious."

"She is not ill—merely absent."

The Duchess looked at the Count silently.

"You don't mean," she said, after a pause, "that she has run away?"

"She has left her home," replied the Count, "and come to England."

"I hope," said the Duchess bluntly, "that she was—unaccompanied."

"Her brother was with her."

The Duchess was relieved. "Ah, that's not so bad," she observed. "A brother is always respectable. And so you have come over to bring her back?"

"To find her," the Count corrected.

"You don't know where she is?"

"I can find no trace. You see," he explained, "I am somewhat handicapped. It is impossible to use the customary agencies,

because, at all costs, a scandal must be avoided. And England, although it appears insignificant in size on the map of Europe, turns out to be quite a large place when one is in search of a flutter-brained girl."

"This is extremely interesting. Oswald, I hope you are listening attentively." The hint was not necessary, for I am sure my ears and mouth were open.

"If the Grand Duke had taken my advice," the Count went on impressively, "this could never have happened. The Grand Duke thought fit—" he shrugged his shoulders resignedly — "to choose an Englishwoman for his wife, and the result is what you see."

"The Grand Duchess died some years ago," remarked the Duchess.

"Ah, but she was responsible for introducing British notions into a German palace. She sent her children to English schools, and she made them speak your language at home and read your books. Her husband abetted her. I cannot understand the infatuation of some of our royalties for English methods and customs, unless it is an instinctive reversion to barbarism. It was only to be expected that with her English ideas the girl should come to the conclusion that she was entitled to reject the husband

selected for her. She has run away because she can't marry just whom she pleased."

"Then there is another man?" queried the Duchess.

"Yes."

"Ah."

The Count had screwed his legs up in an extraordinary manner. I feared he would end by placing one foot on the table. "Yes, there is another man," he said. "It is here the trouble begins."

"Who is he?" the Duchess asked curiously.

The Count paused for a moment. "He comes of a respectable family. He is the only son of a nobleman who holds a worthy position in the Grand Duchy. The Princess saw much of him in the days of their childhood. But who could have dreamt——? Certainly I never did. If only——"

"I am glad," said the Duchess composedly, "the man is of good birth. I think that greatly mends the matter."

The Count grimaced violently, and seemed at a loss to find words. "Noble birth does not excuse a life of shame," he cried. "The fellow is a blackguard, a scoundrel, a common swindler. He was turned out of the army for cheating at cards. God help his poor

father, for the burden of the son's iniquities is heavy on him ! ”

“ You know for certain she has gone to this man ? ” the Duchess inquired.

“ She left a note saying she was going to England to marry the man she truly loved.”

“ But her brother is with her ? ”

“ A lad of sixteen ! But what will that avail ? She has talked him over, and he no doubt believes he is acting for his sister's welfare. How can the boy Carl know the fellow's true character ? For the father's sake, the son's misdeeds were hushed up and he was sent out of the country. It would have been better if he had suffered the penalty of his crimes. It was I who interceded for him, and it is my sovereign who has to bear the consequences of my folly.” He covered his eyes with his hands.

“ You did it for the poor father's sake,” the Duchess said softly. “ You have no cause to blame yourself.”

The Count groaned. “ Yes, you are right. I did it solely for the father's sake. That makes it all the more hard to bear.”

“ I wonder,” said the Duchess, “ who the man is ? ”

The Count did not seem to have heard her ; at any rate, if he did, he chose to ignore the question. “ Oswald and I have a difficult

task before us," he said. "It is to find the unhappy girl and to convey her back to her bereaved father. But we have another duty, which is even more delicate; it is to prevent even a breath of scandal from tarnishing the Princess's name."

"You are a good man," said the Duchess gently, patting the arm of the Count with a caressing motion. He drew himself away quickly.

"Madam," he said fiercely, "if the Princess Isa was dying in agony and I could save her by bending my little finger, do you know what I should do?"

"Bend your little finger, I suppose," said the Duchess.

"No, madam," he cried. "I would humbly return thanks to Heaven, and hasten to give orders for a funeral befitting her exalted rank."

"Tut, tut," said the Duchess.

After this outburst the Count's wrath passed as quickly as it had come. "Oswald and I must leave for town to-morrow. Every day is of vital importance. She has been in England over three weeks, and yet I cannot trace her. To-morrow I shall send Oswald to find her address."

"She has been in England three weeks!" repeated the Duchess. "Why, bless the man, she's sure to be already married."

The Count shook his head. "Ah, no, every movement of her lover is known to me. He is closely watched by my detectives. I had hoped to discover her whereabouts from his movements, but so far he has made no attempt to join her." He turned to me. "Now, Oswald, we have a difficult and even dangerous task before us. I trust——"

"Dangerous?" interrupted the Duchess suddenly. "In what way is it dangerous?"

"The man is a desperate character, and would not hesitate even to commit a murder if it would help him."

"A murder!" cried the Duchess.

"Oswald must be prepared for everything," said the Count, eyeing me, I thought, rather closely. "He must give no chances and take no unnecessary risks. To-morrow I shall send him to find the Princess."

"And how can you expect him to find her, when you yourself have failed, with all your array of detectives?" The Duchess had become quite excited.

"I shall send Oswald to the Princess's lover to demand the information," said the Count calmly. "It is obvious I cannot go myself. If I went, I should feel it my duty to put a bullet through his head."

"And from your description of the man," cried the Duchess, "he will not hesitate to

put a bullet through your head, or rather Oswald's, for you purpose to send the poor lad to him."

"Oswald is free to decline to enter my employment," said the Count. I detected the shadow of a grim smile on his face. "Candidly, I have no use for a young man who is easily frightened."

The Duchess raised her hands with a despairing gesture. "This is not at all the kind of employment I desire for Oswald. Really, Count, I must protest——"

"I am not frightened," I interposed hastily. "And I hope, Count, you will let me assist you."

The Duchess shook her head decisively. "No, no. The fact is," she went on, "Oswald is not quite experienced enough for this kind of work. I know he is very clever, but it is in a different direction."

How rude she was! I think even a grandmother can go too far.

"My abilities, however slight," I said stiffly, "are absolutely at the Count's disposal."

He gave me a glance of approval. The Duchess rose from her chair.

"Oswald is more suited for a nice quiet Government office. There is no reason why he should be set to fighting swindlers and

rescuing princesses. In fact, I won't have it."

The Count rose also, and as the Duchess was evidently making for the door, he sprang to open it.

"Do you forbid Oswald to help me?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered shortly.

The Count stood with his hand on the door-knob. "Oh, Duchess," he said, "this is hardly the spirit of the old days."

She looked at him quickly. The frown faded from her face. "The old days are gone," she said almost pleadingly, "and I am old—old."

"But Oswald is young."

"He has come back to me from the shadows of the past. I cannot let him go into danger. He would not come back to me a second time."

The Count bowed. "I would die rather than cause you distress," he said, but I saw that he was disappointed.

For some minutes I had been bubbling over with vexation, and now I burst in. "You have no right to treat me as if I were a child. You left me to myself for twelve years, and now you interfere to injure my chances and—and—I must say I think——"

She turned and looked at me with pain in her

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eyes. "I am acting in your interest," she said softly, "and because I love you."

"I want to choose for myself," I cried stubbornly.

She stood silent, and seemed to ponder. "I have no right to command your obedience," she said at length. "It is true I neglected you for many years. I reproach myself for that."

"You have nothing to reproach yourself for," I cried impulsively. "I am sorry I spoke like that. I only wanted to say that every man ought to be allowed to decide for himself."

"Every man!" she repeated, and smiled suddenly. "Ah, yes, Oswald, you must forgive me forgetting that you are no longer a child. If I forget again, remind me again, but gently, for I am an old woman."

"I am full of regret," said the Count, "that I have unwittingly caused this controversy. I assure you I can most readily find another assistant."

"No, no," said the Duchess, "I have been in the wrong. I am old and full of fears; Oswald is young and full of courage. So let it be."

She went out of the room very quietly, and although I had scored my point, I felt no triumph.

The Count shrugged his shoulders. "Our womenkind are all the same. They would keep us always by their side. But I am to blame. I was merely trying your nerves, and I tried the Duchess's instead. Ah, no, there will be no danger. It will be wit against wit, may be, but not revolver against revolver. Firearms have become an anachronism in this virtuous century. And even in the war of wits you need have no fear, for you may be sure I shall not leave you to yourself." He seemed to chuckle softly at the notion. "We must take the first opportunity of reassuring the Duchess. Oh, she has changed since the old days!"

CHAPTER VI

THE COUNT'S INSTRUCTIONS

THE next morning the Duchess breakfasted in her own room, and as the Count and myself were due to start shortly after eleven, I began to wonder whether I should see her before I left. However, while I was smoking a cigarette on the lawn she appeared on the terrace. I went to her.

"I am sorry you are leaving me so soon," she said.

"So am I," I answered, still repenting my churlishness of the evening before.

"You are sure you have not changed your mind?"

"Oh, no," I replied decidedly, for I did not want a repetition of last night's scene.

"Give me your arm, Oswald; I should like to walk with you through the flower gardens.

There have been many changes since you were a child."

She took my arm, and we went slowly down the terrace steps.

"You'll take great care of yourself, won't you, Oswald?"

"Oh, yes," I answered lightly.

"Don't let yourself be tricked."

"Certainly not," I responded, indignantly.

She sighed. "How I wish you could get out of the habit of turning red when any one speaks to you. It makes you seem so extremely innocent."

I was speechless with mortification. "I trust," I stammered at length, "I shall be able to show your Grace that I am not so innocent as you suppose."

"You are a dear lad," she rejoined, "and I like you all the better for your simplicity. At the same time, I can't help feeling that a position in some Government office, where ignorance of the world doesn't matter, would be ever so much more suitable."

"You underrate my knowledge of the world," I said stiffly. "You forget that I have been to Oxford, and am twenty-two years old."

"Are you really so old as that?" she said, with simulated surprise. "I had got it into my head you were only seventeen."

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"I must not lose my train," I said, greatly ruffled. "Good-day, madam."

But she held my arm. "Don't let us quarrel, Oswald," she said. "I am only a teasing old woman, who ought to be ashamed of herself. And yet I am not joking altogether. You will be brought into contact with all sorts and conditions of men, and it will need all the vigilance of which you are capable to hold your own. Don't hesitate to wire me, Oswald, if you get into trouble. I have passed in my time through so many experiences, that I have become qualified to advise even an Oxford graduate."

I thanked her briefly, and was even amused that she should see no humour in her suggestion that I, the secretary of a distinguished nobleman, should wire to her, my grandmother, when any difficulty arose. The absurdity of the proposition was very apparent to me.

"We are out of sight of the house, Oswald," she said, "so you may kiss me. That's right. Now run along, for the Count will be getting impatient."

Needless to say I did not run, but walked away with considerable stateliness. The Count was already in the trap which was to take us to the station, and I climbed in alongside of him. As we drove down the

avenue we saw the Duchess on the terrace waving her handkerchief, and the Count flourished a newspaper in response.

"Oh, Oswald," he said, "what a woman she was in her prime!"

"Indeed," I answered politely.

"She had the brain of a man, and the instinct of a woman. Can you imagine a more potent combination? She and I are old now, and the world is for the young, but we have left our mark." He fell into a dream, and spoke no more until we reached the station, though he kept muttering to himself, twitching the muscles of his mouth and grimacing in the oddest way.

We were far on the way to London before he showed himself inclined for conversation. Then, curling himself up in an extremely uncomfortable position, with his right foot tucked away beneath him and his left leg dangling across the middle arm of the seat on his side of the carriage, he began to talk with great fluency.

"You are my secretary," said he, "and I intend to pay you a salary of twenty pounds a month, which is two hundred and forty pounds a year. For so young a man this is a considerable sum, and I trust you will spare no effort to deserve it. That you are honest I know, for it is printed in large letters on

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your ingenuous face. I have it in my heart to wish the type was smaller."

"I can't help my face," I said gruffly.

"That is true," he replied. "But though honesty and stupidity are often allied, I do not think you are stupid."

"Thank you."

"I did not say you were clever," he said sharply, lifting a lean forefinger. "Ah, no, that you have to prove."

"I shall endeavour to do so."

"The man we have to encounter is far more than a match for you," he went on, with a slight degree of complacency. "Yes, indeed, if you and he were left to each other, he would jump on you and trample you and knock the breath out of you; until you were entirely ignorant whether you were dead or alive."

"Would he indeed?" I asked, involuntarily clenching my fist.

The Count noticed the movement and chuckled. "Exactly, you would endeavour to protect yourself by hitting out. Ah, but what would that avail when he would do all these things without exhibiting himself?"

"I don't quite see how he is going to jump on me without showing himself, even if he is so very clever?" I answered, witheringly.

"It is all right," said the Count soothingly.

"You need not be afraid. I am not so foolish as to leave you to him."

This did not console me, and I sat gloomily resolving to show the world in general and my employer in particular that I was a match for any one. It is not altogether impossible that it was the Count's intention to incite me to some such resolution.

The Count suddenly dropped his unpleasantly playful manner, and, with his eye fixed on the rack, plunged into narrative. He traced with a wealth of detail, which it is not necessary to reproduce here, the family history of the Grand Dukes of Saxe-Cassel. Then he spoke of himself, of the growth of the Grand Duchy under his fostering care, of the dignities that had been heaped upon him. He told me of his marriage, of the birth of an only son, by name Wilhelm, and of the early death of his young wife.

Before he had finished, I had begun to regard him in a different light, for he had suddenly become human. This little smirking, grimacing German, so like a Frenchman in some ways, had a life's romance. A country-side, desolated by the ravages of war and by the inexorable demand for money and men, had been the unpromising foundation on which he had built up a flourishing province. Where poverty had stalked, prosperity

now reigned. Factories reared their mighty chimneys from battlefields, and the monuments to the fallen went to pave the streets of bustling commercial centres.

Suddenly he began to talk of his son, and his voice quavered.

"Ah, God, why is he so wicked?" he cried, and thumped his chest and shook his poor old head. I saw the tears start; but he soon rubbed them away, and looked up at me sideways, with a gleam in his little sharp eyes. "But how crafty he is! Ah, there are few so clever!"

Wilhelm, it appeared, was only twenty-five years old. When he was eighteen he obtained a commission in the German army. At twenty-two his energies took the form of spirited gaming, which led him to forge his father's name in order to pay his debts of honour. This the old gentleman forgave on the ground, so he informed me, that it was "Wilhelm's first serious crime." Unluckily, however, it was not his last, for he took to swindling the young officers with whom he came into contact. The Grand Duke became restless, and did not at all regard it as a mitigating circumstance that the fleecing was executed with brilliant precision and success, and with a wealth of resource which the Count, I could see, could hardly abstain from

admiring. So Wilhelm was despatched to England, and instructions were given to his father's man of business to pay him a moderate sum on the first of every month.

"I have cast him off," said the Count, and waved his skinny arms in the air, "but in my heart of hearts I love him dearly. He is my only son. I see myself reflected even in his wickedness; yet there is a difference, for I have never schemed for myself."

It was the Princess Isa whom he mentioned next. Of her, the Count seemed to have no great opinion. He told me candidly he disliked the type of woman who insisted on her own way, and fought recklessly against the shadow of constraint. A woman, he thought, should be gentle and docile, long-suffering and obedient, and should find her sufficient reward in man's approval. He bemoaned his failure to notice the attachment the Princess had formed. She had never shown a sign of it, although he admitted she had opposed the projected marriage with the Duke of Hanau. The Count did not go into details, but I gathered there had been a violent conflict of will between him and the girl.

"The marriage was a desirable one in the interest of the duchy," he said. "It was my duty to insist. She pretended to give

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way, and a day was fixed for the ceremony. And then she and her brother suddenly fled.

"Did you try to stop them?" I asked.

"Their absence was noticed within an hour of their disappearance, and yet we could not trace them. It was remarkable. I cannot understand it unless—unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless Wilhelm's hand was in it. That would explain much."

"Wilhelm?" I exclaimed. "What has Wilhelm to do with the Princess?"

The Count regarded me moodily. "I thought perhaps you would have guessed. Most persons could not have failed to do so."

I brooded over all that he had told me.

"You haven't mentioned the name of the man," I said at length.

"What man?"

"The Princess's lover."

"His name is Wilhelm."

"Your—your son?" I ventured.

"Are you trying to appear stupid?" he replied. "Of course it is my son. That is the trouble."

"Oh!" It took me a long time to assimilate this fact. "And you don't know where she is?"

"I have already told you so," he answered with irritation.

"Why shouldn't your son marry the Princess if they love one another?" I asked bluntly.

This unfortunate remark had an effect I did not expect. The little Count bounced out of his seat like an india-rubber ball.

"Is your insular ignorance so great," he hissed, "that you do not realize my son is no match for the only daughter of a reigning sovereign? I would rather see him dead at my feet!"

I was astonished at his vehemence, which struck me as ludicrous. There had been cases, in my own knowledge, in which scions of German duchies had married other than royalties, and no one seemed to mind very much. It was not till later that I discovered that the Count's religion was devotion to the Grand Duchy, and that the Grand Duke was his god.

"What we have to do," he explained when he grew calmer, "is to prevent Wilhelm marrying the Princess. Of course, the marriage would be invalid in Germany, for she cannot contract a legal union without her father's consent. It might be legal in England, but on that point I am not sure. It is a question for the lawyers. Unfortunately, the

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Princess becomes entitled to her mother's fortune when she attains full age, and Wilhelm no doubt remembers that. At the present time she has no money, and Wilhelm has only his allowance, which I shall stop. Our strength lies in their poverty. Wilhelm will probably do anything for immediate funds, and my view is that the best and quickest way out of this mess is to buy him off."

"But if he loves her——"

"Bah! Wilhelm loves no one but himself. I believe he will do anything for a few thousands. Of course, he will not scruple to take the bribe and then marry the girl. That we must prevent."

"What do you propose?"

"In the first place, to find out where the girl is at all costs. Until I can have her under my eyes, I am consumed by anxiety. If I can find her, I shall not be long in discovering means of getting her back to her home. Once there, she will not get away a second time."

"But suppose they are already married?"

"That is impossible. Wilhelm is under the strictest surveillance. I am convinced the Princess is not in London."

The train was nearing its destination, and the Count began to collect his belongings.

"How are you going to find her address?" I asked.

"That is to be your business," he answered. "This afternoon you will go and see Mr. Parsons, the solicitor through whom I pay Wilhelm his allowance."

"Do you mean Mr. Parsons, of Lincoln's-Inn-Fields?"

"Yes."

"I know him." It was through him, as the reader knows, I received my own allowance.

"Ah, indeed. It was the Duchess who recommended him to me. He is a most trustworthy man, and not even a fool. A clever solicitor who is not a rogue is a gift for which we ought to return grateful thanks to Heaven. You will go to him this afternoon and get Wilhelm's present address. He will tell you if his detectives have reported anything fresh."

"Perhaps the detectives may have found the Princess," I suggested hopefully.

"Wilhelm is not a fool," said the Count sharply. "They do not even appear to communicate by post. The Home Office has been kind enough to permit some slight supervision of his correspondence. He has covered her traces with great artfulness."

"And when I have his address?"

"You will go and see him. Offer him fifty pounds for the Princess's address. I believe

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he is at his last gasp for money, and he may give it out of sheer desperation."

"If he won't?"

"Then offer him a hundred, but not more, without my further instructions. Do you understand?"

"I am to give him a hundred pounds, if necessary——"

"You are not to give him a farthing," he snapped. "What is to prevent him giving you false information?"

"But——"

"You will promise him the sum."

"But you have told me Wilhelm is no fool."

He looked at me and chuckled. "You are quite right. You can give him your word of honour that you will pay him if the information turns out correct. Wilhelm will probably accept the word of honour of a man with a face like yours."

"Who will verify the information?" I asked, wincing at the compliment.

"I shall," said the Count. "Let me know her address, and I start for it at once, though it is in the wilds of Arabia."

"And if it is correct?"

"Oh, you can refer him to me for payment."

I pondered over this for some minutes. "If I cannot redeem my word of honour," I said at length, "I shall not give it."

"You need not be so scrupulous," said the Count. "The man is a scoundrel."

"But I am not."

He smiled not ill-naturedly. "I will write you a cheque for a hundred pounds, or give it you in cash before you call on Wilhelm. So your mind can be at rest."

"Very well," I answered.

"At the same time," he went on warningly, "I forbid you to part with a penny of it till you receive a wire from me that the information is correct."

I considered this with care. "But how am I to be sure you will wire?"

He laughed outright. "You are really very smart, but you must not be too smart. It is possible that by trickery I might do Wilhelm out of a paltry sum, but having regard to the fact that I may have to bargain with him for a bigger stake—the relinquishing of the Princess—you will see that it will not pay me to do so."

"That seems so," I admitted.

"You are more suspicious of me than of my son," said the Count. "But you do me an injustice. I am the soul of honour. I abandoned dishonesty at an early stage of my career. Only short-sighted men are dishonest."

CHAPTER VII

WILHELM

I HAD visited Mr. Parsons more than once since my first interview with him, but it was always with reluctance I went to his office. I never found him otherwise than pleasant, but the clerks in the outer office were a great trial. I had no doubt they knew my history, and I imagined they pitied or despised me according to their respective temperaments. The old white-haired managing clerk, screened by a partition from the vulgar gaze, always left his retreat to scan me with a mild and sympathetic look. The seedy clerk who typed regarded me, I thought, with a mournful interest; perhaps he, too, had difficulties with his pedigree. But it was the untidy office boy, with a high collar, who, I felt sure, considered me a fit object for scorn. The deliberation with which he realized my presence, the air of detachment with which he wrote my name

on a scrap of paper, the affectation of leisure with which he sought his employer's room, and his supercilious mode of commanding me to take a seat and wait, made me long to wring his neck. Possibly the high collar was intended for protection as well as ornament. On the present occasion the office boy was absent, and it was the sad-looking typist who showed me into Mr. Parsons' room. He received me with the civility which always seemed to veil a fixed determination not to give himself away.

"I hope," he said, after our first greetings, "you are getting on well at College."

"I have left Oxford," I answered.

"Oh, indeed. Did you take your degree?"

"Of course."

"I congratulate you. And what are you thinking of doing?"

"I am already at work," I replied, pleased at scoring a point.

He raised his eyebrows. "I am glad to hear it. I trust you have found remunerative employment."

"Only two hundred and forty a year," I answered nonchalantly, though I was proud of the amount of my stipend.

"That is not at all bad—in fact it is very good—at your age. With your allowance, it gives you an income of over five hundred

pounds a year. And you are, let me see—twenty ? ”

“ I am twenty-two,” I replied.

“ Ah, indeed. How time flies ! It seems only the other day you tried to break into my office at midnight. What is your employment ? ”

“ Count Darnsdorf has made me his confidential secretary.”

“ Count Darnsdorf ! ” The lawyer was surprised, and I was correspondingly gratified.

“ I am very pleased to hear this. The Count is a client of mine.”

“ It is on his business I am here this morning.”

Mr. Parsons’ manner changed at once. Instead of leaning back in his chair, regarding me over finger tips pointed in the position of prayer, he sat up all attention.

“ The Count,” I went on, “ has commissioned me to see his son Wilhelm, and I have called to ascertain if you have any fresh information about his movements.”

The lawyer’s tone was much more deferential than usual. “ The detective’s last report gives very little further information. Wilhelm is still at 17, Wix Street, Soho, and he still passes under the name of William Brown. He hardly ever leaves the house, and when he does, it is merely to visit a little foreign

café in Gerrard Street, where he drinks coffee and plays dominoes with the proprietor. He usually goes there at hours when the café is practically empty. There is no doubt he is at the end of his resources. He has written me three times to ask for an advance of his next allowance, which does not fall due till next week. I have taken no notice of his applications."

"The Count wishes the allowance to be suspended in the meantime," I said.

"I am not surprised. In fact, I did not propose to make any further payments without instructions."

"I am going to call on Wilhelm this afternoon," I said, rising. "Will you kindly keep the Count advised of any further developments?"

"Certainly." He eyed me a little curiously. "I wish you good luck in your new sphere. I am afraid you will find the Count an exigent master."

"I am going to do my best," I responded. "So far we are getting on very well together."

Mr. Parsons accompanied me to the door, and I trusted the office boy, whom I observed in his place, noted this unwonted courtesy. On leaving Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, I took a cab to Wix Street. It is a mournful little street, with houses that seem to realize they have

nothing to boast about, and that the less said the sooner mended. I dismissed my cab, and having discovered No. 17 to be the house with the hall door wide open, and two little dirty children on the step, I made my way cautiously across the road and knocked at the door. A great blowsy woman, with bare arms and a wreath of white roses, which on closer inspection proved to be curl-papers, emerged from somewhere and regarded me with a non-committal air.

"Yes?" she asked. "Oh, you dirty varmint!" The latter remark was intended for one of the children.

"Does Mr. William Brown live here, please?"

"Upstairs, first door on the left," she replied. "Do you come from his lawyer?"

I hesitated. Was Mr. Parsons his lawyer?

"Do—do you mean Mr. Parsons?"

"Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, ain't it?"

"Yes, that's right."

She brightened. "He's been wanting to see you. Here, I'll go and tell him. I hope to goodness you've brought him some money." She turned and mounted the stairs at the end of the passage, leaving me to follow in her wake. "He's in bed, you know," she threw over her shoulder. "It's washing day."

Considerably bewildered, I loitered on the

landing while after a hasty knock she dived into a room. "The old skinflint has sent at last," I heard her say as she closed the door. In a minute or two she emerged and beckoned me to enter.

The room was small, and across the window a newspaper was pinned. In the corner was a bed, and under a patch-work quilt lay a young man, smoking a cigarette and surrounded by penny novelettes.

"Good afternoon," said he.

"Good afternoon."

We looked at one another for some moments without further speech. I observed that he had some days' growth of beard on his chin, that his face was thin, and that his deep-set mocking eyes seemed to be regarding my embarrassment with covert amusement.

"Are you Mr. William Brown?" I asked at length.

"That is what I call myself. Won't you sit down?"

I glanced round. There did not seem to be any chair.

"There is the wash-hand-stand," he said.

"But perhaps you would prefer to stand."

"Thank you, yes."

"It will be safer perhaps," he observed.

"I have so few visitors that I do not make elaborate preparations."

"I hope you are not ill," I said.

"Not at all. It is washing day, that's all."

I showed my astonishment.

"Don't you go to bed on washing day?" he asked, with apparent surprise. "Surely you don't go about without any under-clothing? What an extremely unpleasant habit!"

"Do you mean," I said bluntly, "you are in bed because you haven't a change of under-clothes?"

"You have guessed it, gentle stranger," he answered. "You've come from that miserly old brute Parsons? Have you brought me any money?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You—don't—think—so! A nice, bright specimen you are. Why haven't you? Bless my soul, do you mean the old curmudgeon won't advance me a penny of my money a week before it is due? Does he hope I shall die of starvation? Confound him."

"The Count has stopped your allowance," I said briefly.

"Oh." He frowned thoughtfully and lay back, pulling the coverlet up to his chin. "You don't surprise me. Of course, he would guess that I——"

"You mean——?"

"Yes."

I was quite at a loss to catch his meaning. He seemed to be thinking ahead of me.

"Well, what's his offer?" he said at length.

"What offer?"

"I suppose you haven't come here simply to leave your card?" he said with a show of irritation. "Why did you come?"

"I come from the Count," I answered.

"Not from Parsons?"

"I have seen Mr. Parsons," I admitted, "but it is at the Count's request I have come."

"You want to know where the Princess is?"

"Yes, that is why I have come."

"How much?"

"The renewal of your allowance."

"Oh, go to ——" He turned over on his side as if to sleep.

"He might give you a pound or two," I said cautiously.

"I shall require two hundred pounds."

"Well, you won't get it."

"I'll take one fifty——"

"Good-day," said I.

He sat up, disclosing striped pyjamas not so clean as they might be. "Will he give me a hundred?"

"N—no."

He gave a satisfied smile. "One hundred

pounds is the figure," he said. "Well, it might be worse. Hand it over, and I will give you the address."

"You are quite wrong," I answered, trying to hide my confusion. "You must not expect me to give you anything of the kind."

"Pray don't waste time," he said impatiently. "It is quite obvious from your manner that my father has authorized you to pay me a hundred pounds. Why should I take less than he is willing to give? Kindly answer me that!"

I was silent, feeling extremely foolish. How had he guessed?

"I'll give you fifty," I said desperately.

"One hundred, or you can go back to my dear father and tell him you have failed in your mission. These are the two alternatives. Choose quickly, because I am in the midst of an absorbing narrative. My landlady is kind enough to put her library at my disposal. I wonder if you subscribe to the *Hearth-stone Novelettes*? They are extremely interesting, and with a carefully executed frontispiece cost only one penny each. The one which holds me at this moment in its magic grasp is entitled '*Love or Diamonds*?' The earl hovers between a wealthy heiress and a beautiful governess. You can imagine the excitement I feel.

Personally I would rather have the bediamonded heiress. I have a shrewd suspicion, however, the governess was changed at birth, and that of course makes the choice more difficult. Nevertheless——"

"The Count might give seventy-five."

"Pray don't play with me, sir," he said with severity. "It does not at all become a young man of your age."

"I am not playing with you," I answered indignantly.

He looked at me steadily. "Look here, my friend," he said, "I will accept seventy-five pounds if you will give me your solemn word that the Count has not authorized you to pay one hundred pounds."

"Give me the address," I said sullenly, "and you shall have the money."

"It will be more in accordance with ordinary business precautions if you pay the money first."

"The Count has forbidden me to pay anything until your information has been verified."

"What a suspicious nature my father has! And I am an only son! But when does he propose to pay me?"

"As soon as he has made sure you have told the truth."

"Who will pay me?"

"I shall."

"How do I know that?"

"I am not accustomed," I said with dignity, "to break my word."

He eyed me thoughtfully. "Right you are," he said suddenly. "I can trust you. Give me a pencil, and I will write the address down."

I gave him a pencil, and he scribbled something on the back of the fly-leaf of the novelette beside him. "There you are, my friend, and an exciting story into the bargain."

I took it and turned to go.

"Do me a favour," he said quickly.

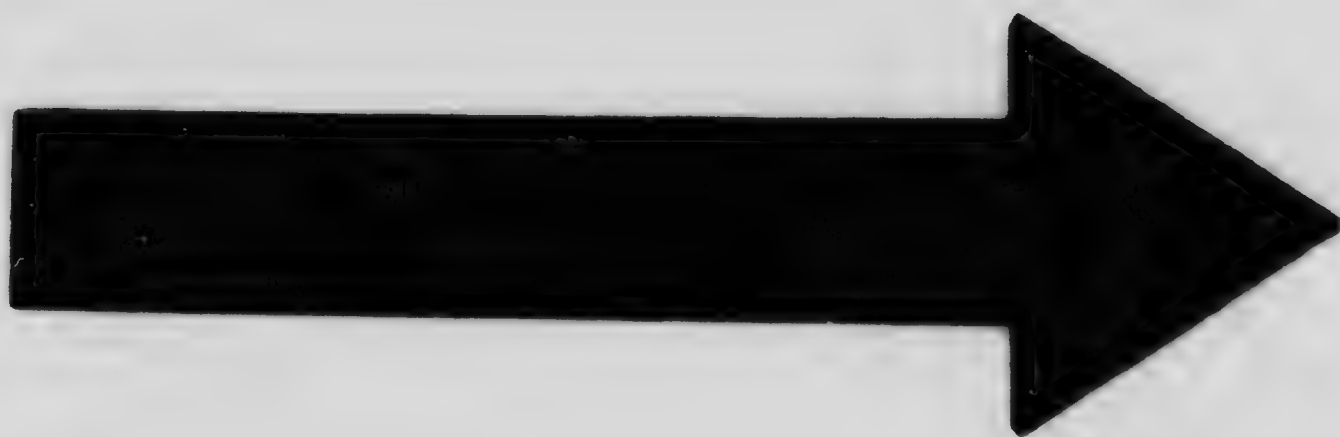
"What?"

"Lend me ten pounds."

I hesitated. There was a look of half-humorous entreaty on his face and a curious fascination in his manner. I pulled out two five-pound notes and gave them to him. After all, it was my own money I was giving him, and surely I was free to do what I liked with it.

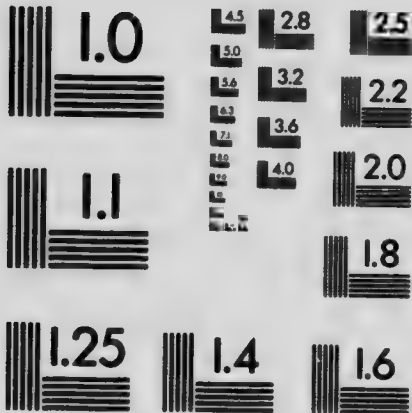
"Thank you," he said heartily. "You are a good sort. I like you. What is your name?"

I told him as I made for the door; pleased but embarrassed by his praise, and half-conscious that I had acted foolishly. I was



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some way down the stairs when I heard him shouting my name. I went back.

"Would you mind asking my landlady if my shirt is dry?" he said. "To tell the truth, I am tired of lying here."

I had to hunt all over Wix Street for the woman. It never occurred to me till afterwards that there was no obligation on my part to do so. On my way back to the Count I became uneasily conscious that a sharper emissary than myself would probably have obtained the same information at a considerably lower figure.

CHAPTER VIII

WILHELM AGAIN

"I'VE made a mistake," said the Count when I had recounted my experiences with his son. He flung one leg over the arm of his chair and grasped his ankle with his hand, blinking at me the while. I was getting accustomed to his grotesque attitudes, which in a schoolboy would be a fit subject for reproachful comment, but in an aged nobleman could only excite respectful wonder.

"In what way?" I ventured rather timidly, for I realized no greater mistake than the choice of myself as his agent.

"If Wilhelm is at the end of his resources," said the Count, "it is the height of unwisdom to put him in funds. Without money, his power for evil is necessarily limited, but this hundred pounds will furnish him with weapons against ourselves."

"I quite agree," I said. "Even the most romantic princess might hesitate to entrust herself to a man with no change of under-clothing."

The Count was not pleased at my acquiescence in his own proposition.

"What else was there to be done?" he asked sharply.

"Nothing, so far as I can see," I answered.

"Then how could it be unwise to adopt the only course open to us?" he asked triumphantly; and I had no reply. "For the moment," he went on, more cheerfully, "he is penniless, and that is so much to the good."

I struggled with the temptation to suppress a certain fact, but my natural honesty triumphed.

"Well," I said shamefacedly, "he is not quite penniless. In fact, I lent—he borrowed ten pounds. Out of my own money, of course."

"Oh," said the Count. He looked at me whimsically. I had expected an outburst of abuse, for I realized that my loan was not diplomatic. But the Count, as I found out subsequently, seldom blamed a subordinate. If he made use of an implement that was not sufficiently sharp for his purpose, he blamed himself, not his tool.

After a few moments' further thought, he

rang the bell, and his servant, Fritz, appeared.

"Fritz," he said, "I have received information that the Princess is staying at"—he scanned the writing on the page of the penny novelette—"Myra Cottage, Marine Road, Oban. Get an ABC and find out where Oban is."

"Oban is in the western Highlands of Scotland," I said.

"Scotland! Then, Fritz, you leave for Scotland to-night. Understand, however, I do not wish the Princess to see you. I merely wish to ascertain if she is living at this address, and if so, under what name."

"Yes, sir," replied Fritz.

"I shall expect a telegram from you in the course of to-morrow."

"Yes, sir."

"Is Fritz to go alone, sir?" I asked, for I had somehow expected to be sent on this errand.

"Yes, of course," he answered testily. "It would be no good sending you."

I flushed a little, for I thought his words conveyed disparagement. He noticed my perturbation.

"I mean," he explained, "that as you have never seen the Princess, it would be impossible for you to verify Wilhelm's information."

He turned to Fritz. "Do not telegraph to me, but to Mr. Chapman. Now go and look up the trains, and be prepared to start at the earliest moment."

"Yes, sir," said Fritz, and retired.

"If the information is accurate," the Count went on thoughtfully, "I think a hundred pounds is a cheap price to pay."

I brightened up at this. "Your son will probably call to-morrow for the money."

The Count twisted round. "I will not see him, you understand. Under no circumstances am I to see him."

"There is no reason why you should," I said, rather surprised at the old gentleman's agitation. "I am to pay him, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, if you have received Fritz's telegram verifying the information. I am not afraid to encounter my own son in a war of wits. In bed, did you say, while they washed his shirt? What a humiliation! Ah, my poor Wilhelm!" The little man's eyes seemed to grow moist.

"He didn't seem to mind much," I said, by way of comfort. "He was pretty cheerful."

"Did he tell you," said the Count, "how he came to such a state? I give him an allowance—not a large one, but sufficient.

Why should he be impoverished to this extent ? ”

I shook my head. “ We didn’t go into that.”

The Count hopped off his chair. “ I know the reason. He has gambled away his money, and even his clothes. The gaming fever is in his blood, and nothing will cure him save death.” He looked up towards the ceiling, and stretched out his hand. “ Oh, God, send the only cure. It would be better for him and for us all.”

I was shocked to hear a father make such an appeal, and I made unobtrusively for the door. The Count sprang after me and caught me by the arm. I looked at his curiously grimacing face with some alarm.

“ You lent him money,” he cried, “ and for no reason but that he asked you ? You could not refuse him ? ”

“ Well, I was sorry——” I began.

“ Oh, you need not explain,” he interrupted. “ You are like the rest—you could not refuse him. Now you are beginning to understand why the Princess has fled from home and reputation at his call. He has charmed her, as he charms every one. What a power he might have exercised for good, if the devil had not lodged in his heart.”

I felt for the poor little man, gesticulating

and trembling by my side, and I began to stammer words of consolation. Suddenly he dropped my arm and turned away.

"I love him very much," he said calmly, "yet I shall have no pity on him."

I left the Count with my thoughts in a tangle. It was obvious that he had a strong affection for his son. At the same time, he seemed absolutely sincere in his intention to circumvent the young gentleman's designs on the Princess. I wondered why. Of course, it was his duty to the Grand Duke to do so. I am afraid I permitted myself to doubt whether his sense of duty would ultimately prove greater than his paternal love, and whether, indeed, in his innermost heart he desired to rescue the Princess from Wilhelm. I had to confess myself puzzled. On one point I came to an instant decision. I was determined not to be an unconscious confederate. If it was really the Count's desire to secure a brilliant match for his son, covering his intention by a pretended antagonism, I was not going to be a party to the trickery. Had the Count chosen me as his assistant because he considered my simplicity and inexperience presented no very formidable barrier to his son's machinations? It was a humiliating thought, and I tried to banish it from my mind not only as humbling to myself but

as disloyal to my employer. After all, I had not the slightest grounds for suspecting treachery, and the Count's whole career proved his absorbing devotion to his sovereign. A sudden compassion for the Count seized me—a father, loving his unworthy son, and yet bound, by the ties of a life-long loyalty, to defeat his plots and to crush the perpetrator.

The next day, late in the afternoon, I received a telegram from Fritz which ran as follows:—

“Just seen the Princess at address named; calls herself Miss Dobson. Awaiting further orders. Wire Alexandra Hotel.”

I handed the telegram to the Count, who read it, and returned it to me without comment.

“Then I am to pay your son the hundred pounds?” I observed.

The Count eyed me for a moment without speaking. “You seem very anxious to do so,” he said, not in the best of humours. “It seems the only thing that worries you.”

“No, at all,” I answered. “I am asking for instructions.”

“You insist on doing so, do you not?” he asked.

With the doubt still in my thoughts as to his sincerity, it came into my head to test him.

"I desire to be guided by you in all things," I said watchfully.

"Then do not pay him," he answered quickly.

I was taken aback. "But—but I have given my word of honour?"

"Then pay him."

"It does seem stupid to give him the means of fighting us."

"Then do not pay him."

"I asked you for directions," I said sullenly.

He smiled grimly, cocking his head sideways in his grotesque fashion. "Honesty and expediency are in open conflict," he observed. "How can I give you instructions? Shall I bid you be dishonest? I could never take so gross an advantage of my position as your employer. Shall I order you to be unwise? You demand too much of me."

I was silenced. He was busily engaged in sorting the contents of a big despatch box, tearing up letters and burning them with scrupulous care. He looked at his watch.

"We must be ready to start for Oban to-night," he remarked.

"To-night?" I repeated.

"There is no train before then," he said severely.

"Of course, I am ready to start at any moment."

"Wilhelm will waste no time," he said; "of that I feel sure. Has he not sent for the money?"

"Not yet," I replied. At that moment the door opened, and a waiter came to inform me that a gentleman wished to see me. The Count was feeding the little bonfire he had made in the fender with the scraps of a torn letter. The flakes ceased to fall from his fingers, and he jerked his wizened body round towards the man.

"Do not show him here," he cried, with a strong German accent, which was only noticeable when he was agitated. "Ach, no, not in here, on any account."

"The gentleman is waiting below," said the servant.

"Did he give any name?" I asked.

"No, sir."

"Go at once," cried the Count, "so that he may not come in here. Hasten, hasten."

I followed the man from the room, and found Wilhelm in the entrance hall. I hardly recognized him, so greatly was his appearance changed. His silk hat and linen were immaculate; he wore a carnation in his

button-hole, and carried a malacca cane in his carefully gloved hands. It was only on a more particular scrutiny I noticed that the weak spot in his attire was his frock coat, which, though obviously new, showed in its lack of fit and finish that it was a ready-made garment. His tall, slim figure carried it well, and no one could have mistaken him for other than a gentleman.

"How do you do?" he said, and extended his hand. "What a charming foyer this hotel has! I have not been accustomed to such magnificence in Wix Street."

"Won't you sit down?" I said, with some embarrassment.

"Oh, I don't want to detain you," he replied. "You must be busy—packing."

"Packing?" I repeated.

"The train leaves at night, does it not?" he said smiling.

I fear I showed confusion.

"Oh, never mind," he observed kindly. "Have you those notes ready? To tell the truth, I haven't enough of your ten pounds left to get lunch, and I am deucedly hungry."

I had the money in my waistcoat pocket, and I produced it.

"Thanks very much," he said, taking the notes nonchalantly. He separated a ten-pound note from the others, which he

pocketed without counting. "Very many thanks for your kind loan, which I hasten to repay. Will you do me the honour of lunching with me?"

"I am sorry, but I have already lunched." I took the note which he extended to me.

"Of course. It is past four o'clock. Ah, I am not so fortunate. Well, *auf wiedersehen*."

"Good-bye."

"Not good-bye," he corrected. "We may meet again, and very shortly. Strangely enough I am leaving for Scotland to-night. Give my kind remembrances to my dear father."

I bowed stiffly, and he turned away. I was going up the stairs when I heard him call me.

"By the way," he said, "could you tell me one thing?"

"What is it?"

"Can you tell me," he asked with apparent earnestness, "if that governess was changed at birth? Stupidly, I gave you that little booklet without having finished the story. And I have been tormented ever since."

I could not help laughing. "I really don't know," I said. "If I find out I will let you know."

"Thank you very much. One does not necessarily lose interest in literature because

one has to earn a precarious living by the exercise of one's wits."

He turned and went out of the hotel very easily and gracefully, and I returned to the Count, who listened to my account of the interview in silence.

CHAPTER IX

LEFT ALONE

BEING under orders to leave for Scotland that night, it became necessary to put some clothes together if I was not to have recourse to Wilhelm's methods of economizing under-linen. I took a 'bus down Piccadilly to my modest rooms in Knightsbridge. It was the height of the season, and there was the usual block half way towards Hyde Park Corner. From the top of my 'bus I was able to look down upon the other vehicles jammed with it in a chaotic mass. My eye fell on an imposing equipage, and with some flutterings of the heart I found myself contemplating the feather in my grandmother's bonnet. She was alone in her carriage, and the coachman and footman on the box were contemplating the back of the inexorable policeman who barred their progress with superb disdain. For a moment I thought of attracting her attention, but the difficulty of doing

so was apparent. Should I shout "Hi!" or should I vociferate "Your Grace!" or in a penetrating whisper the gentler "Granny?" She was so near that I could drop a coin into her comprehensive lap, or by an acrobatic feat, well within my power, drop bodily into the vacant seat opposite to her. I rejected all these expedients in favour of the simpler plan of ignoring her presence. However, a move in the traffic took me a few yards onwards, and I felt impelled to look back to make sure she had not seen me. I caught her eye. I blushed and bowed; she nodded and beckoned. A tipsy man on the seat behind took the salutation for himself and kissed his hand with effusive gallantry.

"Come down," cried the Duchess, shocking the young footman.

"Won't you come up?" invited the tipsy man.

I left my seat and made my way to her. I quite forgot in my confusion I had not paid my fare, and was greatly embarrassed to find the grimy hand of the 'bus conductor stretched beneath my nose. Of course, with my usual luck, I had no coppers, and a sixpence and five coppers had to be counted into my hand while the tipsy man commented from above.

"There is no cause why you should look

so hot and uncomfortable," observed the Duchess good-humouredly. "Why can't you take things calmly?"

"I am not in the least uncomfortable," I replied, rather snappishly.

She laughed. "I hope you are not annoyed with me for taking you away from your amusing friend."

"What amusing friend?"

"Isn't that funny man a friend of yours?" She indicated the intoxicated wag.

"Certainly not."

Her elaborate method of chaffing me always placed me at a disadvantage. She saw I was ruffled, and slipped her hand into mine.

"I was so bored at Pendleton after you had left," she said, "that I was forced to come up to town. I was on my way to your rooms to see if I could induce you to dine with me this evening."

"I have to leave for Oban by the night express," I said importantly, "and I am afraid I shall not have a moment to spare."

"What, is the girl at Oban? You have found out where she is? Now, that is really very smart of you."

"I am not sure she was found altogether through me," I said modestly.

"Nonsense. I am sure it was entirely

through you. For a fortnight the Court has been searching high and low, and in a few hours you find out what he had utterly failed to discover."

This was very pleasant to hear, and I began to wonder whether after all the merit was not mine.

"Oban of all places!" she went on. "What can have taken her there?"

"I have not the slightest notion."

"Of course, the Count goes with you?"

"Oh, yes," I answered, rather offended at the assumption for some obscure reason.

"Oban," she repeated thoughtfully. "We have a shooting box at Dalavich, which is only fourteen or fifteen miles from the town. There is excellent fishing there, if you have any time on your hands."

"I don't suppose we shall be there long," I replied, rather amused at her notion that I should be able to combine the sport of fishing with the unravelling of the domestic affairs of a European sovereign.

"It might be a good place to lock up the young woman if she proves troublesome," observed the Duchess. "A nice quiet secluded spot, and no police within ten miles."

"There won't be anything of that kind," I said, aghast. "In Scotland! What would the papers say?"

"The incident would not be communicated to the press," said the Duchess placidly. "However, the Count will know the best course to adopt. You might tell him of the shooting box if the occasion arises. It's quite at his service. The wretched girl ought to be kept on bread and water for a month at least."

"I will tell him," I said dubiously. I never knew when the Duchess was joking.

"You can never tell," said the Duchess sagely. "In any case, I will warn the caretaker to be prepared for visitors. Is the man at Oban with her?"

"What man?"

"The man she ran away from her home to marry?"

"Oh, you mean——" I stopped suddenly.

"Yes. What's his name?" An intonation in her voice, betokening curiosity, put me on my guard. There were evidently limits to the Count's confidences, and it was not my place to extend them.

"The Count has not given me full information," I said guardedly. "Perhaps he will tell me more later on."

"You don't take me in," she said genially, "but I am glad to see you are cautious. You are perfectly right, although a grandmother is surely to be trusted." She waited for a

moment as if to give me an opportunity of putting this to the test, but I remained dumb. "Well, I hope you will be able to keep the girl out of mischief. Don't fall in love with her yourself, and above all, don't let her fall in love with you."

"There is no fear of either of these things occurring."

I felt her scanning my profile. "Ah, well," she sighed, "let us hope not. But you'll have your troubles with woman-kind before you sink into senile decay."

"That will be the preliminary symptom," I answered, rather smartly as I thought.

"Man is born to be made an idiot of, as the sparks fly upward," said the Duchess.

We had reached Knightsbridge, and the coachman was driving slowly while he searched for my modest turning. I indicated the direction with the Duchess's parasol.

"By the way, Oswald," said she suddenly, "there is one thing I forgot to say to you the other day. When your mother died she left all her letters and papers in the cottage. I had them put into a box and taken to the Castle. I saw to this myself. Most of them were letters from your father to her. Naturally, I did not want any curious person to examine them and rake up a dead scandal. What do you want done with them?"

I frowned, as I always did at any allusion to my parentage. "They had better be burnt."

"All of them, Oswald?"

"I think so."

"There are your father's letters," said the Duchess, a little wistfully.

"These especially ought to be destroyed."

She sighed. "You are quite right. But I wish you had a little more sentiment."

The carriage had stopped at my door. I got out and raised my hat.

The Duchess leaned over the side of the carriage.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to look through the letters before I burn them?"

"Quite sure."

"Shall—shall I?" she asked, with hesitancy.

"By all means, if you care to."

"You would rather I did not?"

"On the contrary, it will be very kind of you to take the trouble."

"Trouble!" ejaculated the Duchess, sinking back among her cushions.

The carriage drove away, and she did not wave to me. I reproached myself for forgetting her exaggerated regard for my father's memory. It is so much wiser to humour the foibles of the old.

Later in the afternoon, having packed my bag, I drove back to the Hotel. I went at once to the Count's private room, and found him screwed up in a capacious armchair, his legs crossed in Turkish fashion and his head in his hands. In this attitude he seemed to be studying the pattern on the carpet.

"Heaven help the Princess!" was his greeting. "It is some comfort, however, to know that she will deserve all she gets."

"Is there any news?" I asked.

"Yes, I must leave for Germany to-night."

"What?"

"The Grand Duke is seriously ill—probably dying. I must go to him at once. It is essential."

"Oh, indeed!" said I, all sorts of vague suspicions recurring to my mind. "And what about the Princess?"

"Damn the Princess," he said curtly. "I wish the devil would carry her off, provided he never returned with her." He glared at me with eyes that seemed to emit angry sparks.

I stood silent, watching his working face, wondering whether his anger was real or assumed.

"How do you know the Duke is ill?" I asked bluntly.

He indicated a foreign telegram that lay on the table.

"Who sent that? Are you sure it isn't a trick of Wilhelm's?" I asked.

A faint smile twisted his lips. "It is a relief to hear you make that remark. It shows you do not under-estimate Wilhelm's ingenuity. But no, it is not his doing. It is Fate — a cursed Fate, which meddles from pure malevolence."

"And you must go at once?"

"Yes, at once."

"And the Princess?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You must do your best."

"Alone?" I cried.

"I suppose so," he said irritably. "Who else is there? You can have Fritz, if you like, but he is a fool."

I sat down slowly. I could feel my heart beating.

"What am I to do?" I asked feebly.

"You must do what you can." There was despair in his voice. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, but—you are no match for Wilhelm. Still, there it is. You must do your best, for he will do his worst. Besides, there is such a thing as luck. One never knows. Yes, you will go to Oban, and you will do your best to prevent a marriage between the Princess and my graceless son."

"Yes, but how?" I persisted.

"See the Princess, emphasize the fact that no marriage will be legal without her father's consent, and that any children born to her will be bastards. Use the simplest and the plainest language."

"I am to say that—that—" My tongue failed me. Had the Count forgotten that I was a bashful young man and the Princess a young woman?

"It is no time for squeamishness," said the Count curtly. "Wilhelm counts on the confirmation of the marriage, once it has taken place, as the only means of saving the Princess' reputation. And I daresay he is right. So it is a case of bluff against bluff. If the marriage ceremony takes place, Wilhelm has won. If you can prevent it, you are the victor. You have two alternatives, and you may be successful with one or the other."

"What are these two?" My brain was in a whirl.

"In the first place, you must endeavour to frighten the Princess. You must work on her feeble woman's mind, until she voluntarily relinquishes all notion of marrying Wilhelm. Do not let Wilhelm deceive her with specious promises. Let her fully comprehend the dire consequences of her mad act if persisted in. If you can once get her out of Wilhelm's clutches, and can lock her up

in a cellar till I can get back to you, do so, by all means. I don't care what you do, provided you avoid all scandal."

"I am to lock up the Princess in a cellar without causing a scandal," I repeated hopelessly. And then the absurdity of the suggestion came home to me, and I laughed.

"Prison isn't take me too literally," said the Count. "I only mean you are to follow whatever course commends itself to you, remembering the one object we have in view."

I tried to bring my thoughts into coherence. "Instead of a cellar, would a shooting box do?"

"A box?" he repeated, evidently not understanding me. "By all means, provided you make a few air-holes."

I laughed again, and the Count laughed too, an angry, irritated laugh, but his face clouded quickly. "There are things more important than a woman's honour," he said. "I would have done my best for her. Yes, I would have saved her from a life of misery. But I must listen to a louder call, and my place at this moment is in my own country. God only knows what confusion will arise if I am absent from my post when the Grand Duke dies. And the Princess—" he shrugged his shoulders—"must take her chance."

"I will do my best," I murmured.

He stared up at me. "If you were of our blood I should tell you your duty, and if you were a true son of your country you would do it."

"What would be my duty?" I asked curiously.

"It would be to put a bullet through my son's black heart, and then to go cheerfully to the scaffold."

"I don't propose to adopt that course," I said blankly.

"I do not expect you to do so," he responded with a sudden smile. "That is not the second alternative to which I alluded."

"I am relieved to hear that," I said.

"I have paid ten thousand pounds to your banking account. You are at liberty to expend it how you please in the pursuit of your object."

"You mean I am to buy Wilhelm off?"

"If you can." He suddenly sank into despondency. "I wonder whether Wilhelm will get both the Princess and the ten thousand pounds."

I flared up at this. "If you think me a fool——"

"I think nothing of the sort," he responded. "I wait to see."

His words acted as a tonic. "You will find that I am a match for Wilhelm," I

said resolutely. "Candidly, I am not a bit impressed by your admiration of his remarkable abilities. Fathers, naturally enough, are somewhat indulgent critics."

He did not seem to hear my observations, or if he did he took no notice.

"There are powers which over-ride human foresight and human wisdom," he said. "We must accept the inevitable with a good grace. You may by some chance prove successful where I might have failed. I can only hope." But he shook his head mournfully, and I never saw a more dismal face.

"Have you any more directions to give?" I asked a little impatiently, for his misgivings were not flattering.

"You will leave for Oban to-night."

"Very well."

"You will report to me as frequently as possible, and by telegram in all emergencies."

"Yes."

"Then that is all. Stay, do you want Fritz?"

I hesitated. The Count had said Fritz was a fool.

"He is essential to my personal comfort," said the Count. "Without him my razors go unstropped, and my wig loses its curl. Yet if you want him, you have only to say so."

That determined me. "No, thanks. I will do what I can alone."

"Good luck," said the Count, and he tried to smile cheerfully, but I heard him groan as I went down the stairs.

CHAPTER X

MY SCHEME

WHEN I reached King's Cross at eleven o'clock, I had only begun to recover from the mental confusion into which the Count's abrupt withdrawal from our joint enterprise had plunged me. I found myself endeavouring to plan out some scheme of action, but I had always to relinquish my effort from an inability to grasp the situation. The whole position seemed so preposterous. If a young man is commissioned to prevent a marriage between a nobleman's only son and the daughter of a European sovereign, what should the young man do? That was the problem, but I could not convince myself it was a real problem, because young men do not have that kind of task set them. On the other hand, it must be a real problem, for here was I at King's Cross station with a ticket for Oban in my hand, evidently for some purpose. If I couldn't find any solution, the Princess would marry

an unprincipled man of preternatural cunning, and the Duchess, who was really my grandmother, would think me a perfect fool.

I stood still and stared vacantly at the bustling throng on the platform. When the porter who carried my bag asked me what class I was travelling, I was laughing to myself, for my fancy was depicting a beautiful Princess, with long golden hair, being dragged through the streets of a Highland town by a shy young man, in search of a cellar. After I had taken my seat in an empty first-class carriage, I continued to bubble with amusement, for the more I considered it, the more farcical appeared the nature of my adventure.

I continued to splutter with laughter until the train began to move. At that moment, someone snatched open the door and sprang in; and then my smiles died away very quickly, for the newcomer was Wilhelm.

"Hullo," said he."

"Hullo," said I.

"So you've left the old man behind?" he observed, taking off his ulster, and throwing it and his hand-bag into the rack.

I made no answer. It was apparent the "old man" was not with me, unless he was concealed beneath the seat.

"I knew he wouldn't come," said Wilhelm, settling himself in a corner.

"You knew that?" I asked quickly, very much on the alert. "How could you know that?"

"I heard of the illness of the Grand Duke. In fact, it is in the evening newspapers. I knew it would alter my venerable father's plans. It occurred to me we might make this tedious journey together. For, you know," he added, "I have taken a liking to you."

"Have you indeed?" I answered, with coldness.

"Your ingenuous face is a passport to instant predilection."

I considered his remark impertinent, and tried to think of some cutting rejoinder, but failing, I buried myself in my newspaper, uneasily conscious he was watching me with an amused smile.

"I hope you are not averse to conversation," he said. "I feel in a particularly talkative mood."

I looked at him over my newspaper. "I do not think we can have anything in common," I said curtly.

He proffered his cigar-case. "We will have these in common, if you will."

"No, thank you. I am smoking a pipe."

"I have forgotten to bring a pipe," he said plaintively.

"I am afraid I cannot offer to share mine—nor my underclothing," I added.

He laughed merrily. "Ah, yes, you have me there. But, thanks, I am plentifully supplied." He seemed so thoroughly to appreciate my jest that I felt inclined to thaw a little.

I read my paper in silence for some time, and he stared at the blue rings of smoke he made.

"I suppose you don't play picquet," he said at length. "This journey is going to be a tedious one."

"No, I don't," I said sharply. "Nor can I spot the queen from three cards."

He frowned a little. "Your retorts are on schoolboy lines," he said, rather grimly.

When I had finished my paper I threw it down, and I happened to catch his eye.

"I can't help wondering," he said pleasantly enough, "what you intend doing at Oban."

"That is my business."

"It happens to be mine also," he responded. "For are we not on the same errand?"

"Quite different," I said, pretending to stifle a yawn.

"That's true," he said thoughtfully.

"Yours is more despicable than mine."

"Impossible," I said emphatically.

He became serious. "Is it not contemptible to try and separate two loving, faithful hearts?"

"I only admit one loving, faithful heart," I replied with scorn.

"Well, well, perhaps you are right," he answered, with easy tolerance. "Women are proverbially inconstant."

This was not to be borne. I took the pipe out of my mouth. "You spoke of a despicable errand. What can be more despicable than to endeavour to entrap a young, inexperienced girl into a marriage which you know will be an invalid one?"

"Her marriage will be valid enough."

"You know the contrary," I retorted with heat.

He smiled. "Do you think the Grand Duke will allow his daughter to bear the odium of an irregular connection when by a word he can regularize it?"

"And you count on that?" I asked with contempt.

"I count on nothing. For my part I don't care a straw whether he consents or not. However, I am interested in the expression of your views, which I assume will

be placed in due form before the Princess. I fancy she will not be greatly impressed."

He made no further remark, and I moved to the opposite corner of the carriage and, wrapping my rug around me, tried to sleep. He lit a cigar, and closing his eyes, seemed lost in meditation.

The measured motion of the train lulled me into the semi-conscious torpor which is the only substitute for sleep railway travelling can offer. Several times I woke with a start, and turned my eyes towards the silent figure in the far corner. He did not seem to care to sleep, for he smoked steadily, lighting each fresh cigar with the dying ashes of the previous one. What was he thinking about? What preternaturally cunning scheme was he evolving? I wondered whether he was really "preternaturally cunning"; or was I frightening myself with a bogey of the Count's creation? Perhaps it was only the mystery which surrounded him in my imagination, due in great part to his inscrutable manner, which made me fear a craft which might not, after all, be very profound. How often, in my own slight experience of men, had I regarded with awe and reverence individuals who, on closer acquaintance, proved to be framed on simple lines! Preternatural cunning! There was no such thing—it was a

phrase without meaning. Surely my own sterling common-sense should be a sufficient armour against all assaults. Ah, if I could only be quite, quite sure I possessed sterling common-sense! When one is young, want of confidence and cocksureness are not far apart, and I fluctuated between the two moods with distressing rapidity.

I was so anxious to do something brilliant. I pictured situation after situation in which I distinguished myself, wringing reluctant admiration from my antagonist. Curiously, it was not the Count or my grandmother whom I wished to impress, nor even the unknown Princess, in whose personality I felt not the slightest interest, it was Wilhelm himself. His assured manner, with its half-amused tolerance of myself, galled me. He seemed, not so much by words as by an indefinable intonation in his voice, to treat me as a negligible quantity, a poor tool of his father, not to be taken seriously when the guiding hand was absent. I determined to show him he was wrong, but I should have slept more peacefully if I could have convinced myself he was not right.

About three o'clock, when the dawn was beginning to dominate the darkness, I gave up the attempt to sleep, and sitting up lit a pipe. Wilhelm also opened his eyes.

"I suppose you haven't got a spare pipe you could lend me?" he said, and smiled. He certainly had a winning smile. "I have finished all my cigars, and I want badly to smoke."

"I should think you have smoked quite enough for one night."

"Oh, pray don't oblige me if you would rather not," he said quickly.

I felt ashamed of my churlishness, and opening my bag, produced a brand new pipe, which I handed him. He took it, and thanked me cordially. The pipe had cost me five shillings, but I felt as if the obligation was on his side.

"I quite realize it is impudence on my part to ask you for anything," he observed. "But, somehow, I don't feel on antagonistic terms with you."

I even felt flattered when he asked me for some tobacco. He made a remark about its superiority to the sort he was accustomed to use, and I felt that even in the choice of tobacco I showed remarkable discrimination. In a few minutes we were chatting, without any sense of constraint on my side. He deferred to my opinion in the most courteous way possible, and I was delighted by his immediate recognition of the profundity and subtle reasoning underlying

my slightest remarks. I plumed myself that he was beginning to realize that he had no simpleton to deal with, but one able to meet him on equal terms.

I remember I was giving him my considered views on the German drama—views, by the way, which had only matured since he had introduced the subject, when he suddenly interposed with an entirely irrelevant remark.

"By the way," said he, "have you authority to buy me off?"

I was so taken aback that for a considerable period of time my mouth remained open. He puffed at his pipe, eyeing me fixedly.

"It seems to me," he went on, "that if this should happen to be the case, and we can agree on a figure, my journey will be brought to an agreeable close almost before it has started."

"The Count has given me plenary powers," I answered at length, a little importantly.

"Ah, but has he given you the cash?" asked Wilhelm.

I hesitated. "Well," I said slowly, "he has not sent me to Oban empty-handed."

"I suppose you will not tell me how much he has given you?"

"Oh, a thousand or so" I replied, with a wave of the hand.

"I could not take less than five thousand," he said quickly.

"It is curious you should have fixed on that figure," I made answer with fine cunning.

"That is the sum, is it?"

"I have not said so," I answered, with a confusion which I am proud to say was simulated. "But I'll give you a thousand pounds if you'll undertake——"

"Five thousand is the lowest I can accept."

"Oh, absurd," I said.

"Come, let us make the bargain. Will you give me five thousand if I relinquish the Princess?"

"If I were sure you would relinquish the Princess, I might possibly give you that amount. But I don't see how you can convince me on that point."

"Would not my word of honour——?"

"Certainly not."

He drew himself up. "Do you wish to insult me?"

"I have the Count's instructions."

He nodded. "Oh, of course." He let down the window and stared out moodily at the fields flying past.

I was the first to break the silence. "Do you really mean you would be prepared to

give up the woman you love if you are paid enough ? " There was more than a trace of wondering contempt in my voice.

He turned quickly. " Why do you assume I love the Princess ? "

" Well," said I, " she loves you."

" Ah, that is different. Many women have loved me. The Princess is not even a woman, she is merely an ungraceful child in the awkward stage of her girlhood."

" I understand she is nineteen."

He shrugged his shoulders. " She may be. But the impression she gives is of a clumsy girl some years younger."

" Then why—— ? " I began.

" To get money," he interposed abruptly. " Money is what I want. I must have money."

" This," said I, " is disgusting."

A look of amusement passed over his face. " You are shocked ? My want of hypocrisy is too much for your weak stomach. Ah, my friend, if we have many dealings together you will find I have no hesitation in describing my own actions in their proper terms. I have no defence, except my desire for money. It is the motive force that actuates us all. Most men are prepared to sell their souls for it, but I am perhaps singular in admitting the fact."

"But the poor girl? Have you no consideration for her?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "A petulant tom-boy of a girl! If I married her, I should desert her as soon as I had her fortune."

"I shall tell her what you say."

"Of course. Why not?" His eyes mocked me. I began to wonder if his shocking cynicism was real or assumed.

"Do you love no woman?"

A change came over his face. His hard eyes softened. "I wonder if you will believe me if I tell you the truth. Yes, there is one woman in the whole of the wide world whom I love and for whom I would willingly die. She is an English governess, with a pure white soul. She is poor and friendless. Her life has passed in hard places. If she will marry me, I think I might become a respectable member of society."

"Does she love you?"

"I believe so."

"Then why not marry her?"

"Because she will not. She is too honest."

I pondered his words. "Where did you meet her?"

"In Cassel. She came to the Palace as a companion to the Princess. She knows of the Princess's infatuation for me, and so loyal

is she to her, that she refuses to listen to me. She left Cassel two years ago. Perhaps it was my persistence that drove her away. Ah, Mina, Mina, it is a cursed fate that keeps us apart ! ”

“ And where is she now ? ”

He looked up quickly. “ Surely you can guess. The Princess fled to her cottage in Oban.”

What a remarkable situation ! I strove to assimilate this new information. Wilhelm’s head was bowed over his folded arms, and he was gazing mournfully into vacancy. So he really loved, and not a Princess with an enormous fortune, but a poor friendless governess ! With all his cynical cynicism, he had that attribute of humanity, a heart that could be touched. Might he not by so pure a passion be raised above his own sordid intentions ? What a pity Maria’s loyalty to the Princess prevented her from falling in with Wilhelm’s wishes ! What a glorious ending to all my troubles if Wilhelm married the girl he loved and who loved him ! It was impossible to conceive a more perfect ending to my anxious enterprise. I bent over and touched Wilhelm’s knee. I know my face was aglow with excitement.

“ I will pay you five thousand pounds on the day you marry this young lady.”

He started, his face lighting up suddenly. But it relapsed into gloom.

"She will not hear of it. Ah, you do not appreciate her perfect loyalty."

"But," I said eagerly, "it is in the best interests of the Princess. This must be explained to her. When she understands that, her scruples will vanish."

Wilhelm shook his head. "It will not be possible to persuade her."

But I brushed aside all difficulties. My way shone before me so straight and clear, it might have been a macadamized road through a swamp. "Perhaps," said I, "I—I might be able to make her understand."

"You can try," said Wilhelm. "I must confess I have little hope."

But I bade him be of good cheer. I think I more than hinted that he might safely lean on me.

CHAPTER XI

MYRA VILLA

WE reached Stirling at about half-past eight. For the last few hours Wilhelm had slumbered peacefully, and I had remained awake, revolving possibilities. Never was a child more delighted with a new plaything than I was with my own idea. The more I considered it, the more pleased I was with it. Once married, Wilhelm's power for evil was at an end. The Princess was free, and I, too, was free—free to receive the warm congratulations of the Count and the unrestrained admiration of my grandmother. Yes, and not only would the problem be solved, but I would have five thousand pounds to the good. With what an off-hand air I would tender to the Count the balance of the sum he had paid to my credit. "Oh, by the way, I didn't require all you gave me." Preternatural cunning,

indeed ! Who had been the cleverer, I with my ingenious solution, or Wilhelm, who was bought off with five thousand pounds when he might easily have had double ?

At Stirling, Wilhelm and I went to the refreshment room for breakfast. He was ready to return to the carriage, when I was chipping my second egg. I finished my meal leisurely, talking the while with all the *aplomb* of the seasoned man of the world to a red-cheeked waitress whose Scottish accent sounded pleasant to my ear. She was very attentive—too much so, indeed, for one irate old lady, who asked her markedly if she was paid to wait only on young men. I had still five minutes after discharging my bill, and I decided to send a wire to the Count, the purport of which I had already framed in my mind. "All going well. Wilhelm fallen into my trap," were the words I had fixed upon. I made my way to the telegraph office, and, curiously enough, encountered Wilhelm emerging.

"I have just wired to the Alexandra Hotel at Oban to retain a room," he said easily. "I should advise you to do the same."

I thanked him, and he left me and made his way back to the train. I sent off my telegram to the Count, adding my address at the Alexandra, and joined him.

"I suppose you will call on the Princess as soon as you arrive?" he asked.

"I suppose so."

"If you do decide to speak to Mina—Mina Dobson is her full name—you will use tact?"

"I think you can trust me," I responded with dignity.

"Of course I can," he answered. "I only wanted to warn you that a too hasty approach to this delicate subject might defeat your ends. By the way, did I mention that the Princess is passing as Mina's sister? Don't you think it will be desirable to preserve the Princess's *incognita* for the time being?"

"Most certainly," I replied, remembering the Count's injunctions to avoid a scandal.

"Have you any idea as to future movements?" he asked. "Do you propose to remain at Oban for long?"

I considered this point, which, to be truthful, had not occurred to me before. "I think it will be best to get them both to move to some quieter place than Oban—until we can come to some arrangement concerning Miss Dobson and yourself."

"I agree with you entirely," he answered, with a trace of eagerness.

"The Duchess of Pendleton has very kindly

placed her shooting-box at my disposal," I observed.

"Where is it? and who is the Duchess of Pendleton?"

"It is at Dalavich, about fifteen miles from Oban. The Duchess is a — friend of mine."

"Is there a church there?"

"A church! Sure to be. There is no lack of churches in Scotland."

"I suppose, if Mina is willing, our banns might be called there?"

"A very excellent notion," I observed with approval.

"But that will take some weeks. Is there no quicker way?"

"You might get a special licence."

Wilhelm fingered his moustache thoughtfully. "If Mina consents at all, I am afraid she will resent undue haste. However, we must see how things turn out."

"Well," I said, "why not be called in the usual way? After all, a few weeks in the Highlands will be not unpleasant at this time of year."

"Oh, not at all," said he, but without enthusiasm.

"I suppose Carl, the Grand Duke's son, will not mind the change of locality?" I said.

He looked at me abstractedly. "Carl? He is not here. Of course, he has returned to Germany."

"I did not know that."

"Bless my soul, his father may be dying, and he is the heir to the duchy. Naturally, when I wired to the Princess of the Grand Duke's illness, the boy would hasten back."

"You don't know he is actually gone?"

"Can there be a doubt? One does not play fast and loose when thrones are at stake."

"I am glad he is out of the way," I said. "That may prevent complications."

"Carl is a good lad," said Wilhelm, "and I have considerable influence over him. When he succeeds the Grand Duke, I should not be astonished if my father experienced considerable changes. Ah, we shall see!"

"He is only a lad, isn't he?"

"Sixteen or so. I really forget his age."

"How old is Miss Dobson?"

"Ah, Mina is—let me see—about twenty. Would you like to see her picture?" He produced a photograph from his pocket and handed it to me. It showed a beautiful face, with large clear eyes. The line of the mouth seemed to indicate considerable firmness.

"Very nice indeed," I said politely. "I

should think she has a good deal of character."

"It does not do her justice. Oh, she is very beautiful." He kissed the photograph devotedly before returning it to his pocket.

About two in the afternoon we reached Oban. Taking Wilhelm's advice, I drove with him to the Alexandra Hotel and lunched with him. He suggested that, later in the afternoon, we should call together on the Princess. To this I assented willingly, for now that we had a common aim there seemed no reason why we should not work together.

After lunch, while I was getting ready for my call, a telegram was brought to me. It was from the Count. "Take care Wilhelm is not entrapping you," the message ran.

I was not a little displeased at the doubt the Count seemed to express as to my competency. But doubt is infectious, and I sat upon my bed and pondered. Was it possible I was being bamboozled? Was Wilhelm pretending to be in love with Mina in order to obtain easy access to the Princess? It might be so. But if this was the case, why did he acquiesce so willingly to her removal to Dalavich? Of course, it might be because he intended to be married to her at the church he had inquired so particularly about. And yet the only way to get the five thousand

parents was to give up the Princess and marry Mina. Was I too suspicious? Perhaps there ought to be a limit to vague imaginings of this kind. At the same time, I renewed my resolution to be most cautious, and to observe Wilhelm as a diligent cat would watch a circumspect mouse.

Myra Villa was little more than a cottage standing on the outskirts of Oban, overlooking the bay. In front was a little neglected garden enclosed by a wooden paling. An abode more unsuitable for the daughter of a Grand Duke could hardly be conceived. In front of the gate, Wilhelm and I stopped by a common impulse.

"Shall I go in first to prepare them?" he said. "Or shall we go in together?"

"Together," I replied firmly, determined to keep a strict watch on his least movement.

"And there is one thing I want you to promise me on your word of honour."

"And what is that?"

"That you will never see the Princess alone without my permission."

"I give you my word without hesitation," he said quite readily. "I am trusting to your honour, and you may safely trust to mine."

I thought Wilhelm appeared slightly nervous as he pushed open the wooden gate

and passed through the patch in front of the cottage. It could hardly be called a garden, crowded as it was with great sunflowers run wild, which had crushed the life out of less assertive vegetation. He knocked on the plain wooden door with his stick, for there was neither bell nor knocker. There was no answer, and he tapped again. We heard steps at length, and the latch was lifted, and I was face to face with the original of the photograph.

"Mina!" cried Wilhelm. The girl flushed scarlet.

"You have come!" she murmured.

Wilhelm held out his hands, and after a moment's hesitation she put hers into them. He drew her close and kissed her.

"Ah, no!" she cried, and drew herself back. Her eyes caught mine, and I looked away uncomfortably.

"This is Mr. Oswald Chapman," said Wilhelm, perfectly at ease. "He is the emissary of my wicked father."

I bowed. The girl looked at me with sudden interest.

"Won't you come in?" she said, and made to let us pass. I waited for Wilhelm to take the lead, but he was playing with a gigantic sunflower, that, bowed by its own weight, stretched half-way across the pathway. He

took out his penknife and severed the flower from its stalk—an immense disk about the size of a soup-plate.

"Is the Princess in?" he asked carelessly.

"Yes, she is within," said Mina.

"Ah." He put the flower in his button-hole. "Let me decorate myself in her honour."

The girl laughed softly. "How ridiculous you are, Wilhelm," said she, and I wished I had thought to make her laugh by putting a sunflower in my coat.

"It's a pretty place, this," he said. "The air is delicious." He glanced towards the dark little passage. "I can breathe out here."

"You mustn't run down my little cottage," said Mina. "I am very proud of it."

Wilhelm looked at her with sudden seriousness. "And yet it is no place for you and the Princess."

She met his look. "It may not be suitable for the Princess, but as for me, have I not lived here nearly all my life?"

"And yet it is not suitable."

She made a little movement with her shoulders. "Come in at any rate, and have tea. The Princess is longing to see you."

"Poor little Dobbs!" said Wilhelm. "Is she as wild as ever?" He turned to me.

" 'Dobbs' is a singularly unromantic name, but she has always been called so since she was a baby."

"It will be best to remember that the Princess is no longer a child," said Mina, a little primly.

I followed Mina down the dark passage and into a room that opened from it. It was a plainly furnished little apartment, and as one entered, it was with the inclination to bow the head to avoid the low lintel. A young girl was sitting with her back to the window, nervously twisting her fingers. She looked up rather shyly as I entered. I noticed her face was severely freckled, and that she had well-cut features and a mass of auburn hair, done up loosely in a massive plait behind her back.

"This is Mr. Chapman, the gentleman the Count has sent," said Mina introducing me.

"Oh, indeed," said the Princess. She regarded me curiously. "Why, you are quite young."

"I am not so very old," I admitted.

"How rosy your face is!"

"Hush, Dobbs!" said Mina reprovingly.

"That is not the way to speak to Mr. Chapman."

"I shall speak to him exactly as I please," said the Princess. She rose from her seat

and came across. She was taller than I had thought, but she moved awkwardly, tripping over a stool. When she reached me, she held out her hand. "I rather like your looks," she observed. "I wonder you consent to do the dirty work of that old Count."

"I do no dirty work."

"Oh, don't you?" she responded contemptuously. "Don't you want to marry me to a snuffy old man about eighty years of age?"

"Dobbs, Dobbs!" exhorted Mina.

"Let's have tea," said the Princess.

"Have you brought the Count with you?"

"No, he had to go to Germany, because
—"

At that moment, Wilhelm entered. The Princess, who had resumed her seat, rose in great excitement, shrieked "Wilhelm!" and fled to his arms.

"Dear old Dobbs!" said Wilhelm.

The girl laughed and giggled, and hid her face on his shoulder. "Oh, Wilhelm, how good it is to see you again. How do you think I look?"

"You look as beautiful as ever." He placed a hand on either side of her head, and imprinted, as I thought, a somewhat cold salute on her forehead. Mina looked away. I quite understood her feelings.

The girl broke from Wilhelm, laughing uproariously, and, as I thought, hysterically. I expected a scene, and was relieved when Mina distracted attention from her charge by calling on us all to help her to make tea.

After all, it was rather a pleasant party. I found myself making toast, and when that task was done, I felt much pleasure in waiting on Mina, helping her by lifting the kettle off the hob, and pouring boiling water, at her dictation, into the little earthenware teapot. Wilhelm had produced the sunflower, which he presented with many fine speeches to the Princess, averring he had brought it all the way from London, and that it was of a rare species, and much more nonsense of the kind. The Princess, when she got it into her hands, persisted in a fruitless attempt to balance it by the stalk on her nose, laughing merrily when she failed. It was all very pleasant and homely, but——

I relapsed into thoughtfulness. I had never before met a princess, yet I had my notions how a princess should behave. Now, if Mina had been the Princess I could have accepted the situation without demur. Her slow, graceful movements, the sad look in her eyes, the charm of her sudden smile made her look every inch a princess. But that wild tomboy of a girl, so noisy and *gauche* —

she a princess ! It struck me as preposterous. Could it be that Wilhelm was endeavouring to palm off this awkward damsel on the Princess Isa ? She spoke English without a foreign accent, and here was another ground for suspicion. Wilhelm did not know I was acquainted with German. Perhaps I could trap her. So turning suddenly, I addressed her in German.

She looked a little surprised, and then answered me fluently. And for the rest of the visit we all spoke German.

Ah, no, the plot, if there was one, was deeper than that. And, after all, I had no grounds for suspecting deception. I suppose tomboys are bred in palaces as well as in humbler habitations. A kitten has an erratic youth, but it sobers down into a very sedate cat. So perhaps princesses, however ungovernable in their earlier years, grow domesticated in after life. And yet I should like to be quite sure. If I could only get a photograph of the Princess I would forward it to the Count, and ask him to wire me if things were not right. Or I might telegraph him to send me the Princess's photograph. Yes, that would be the best course.

I felt my gloomy concentration on my own thoughts was becoming marked, and I roused myself.

"Mr. Chapman thinks," observed Wilhelm, "that we should all migrate together to some more secluded spot."

This was hardly what I had suggested. The two girls were looking towards me, and I had to speak.

"The Count——" I began.

"I shall not listen to you if you are going to quote the horrid Count," interposed the Princess, pertly.

"Hush, Dobbs!" said Mina. "What were you going to say, Mr. Chapman?"

"He—he thinks," I went on rather awkwardly, "that it would be better if we were to stay——"

"We!" interjected the Princess. "Are you joining our happy party permanently?"

There was a dead silence. Had the moment arrived when a firm stand had become necessary? I decided it had.

"Yes," I said defiantly, and glared at them all.

"Very pleased, I'm sure," said the Princess demurely, smoothing the front of her dress.

"So convenient, Wilhelm. Mr. Chapman can be your best man."

Wilhelm laughed, and Mina, although scandalized, rippled in unison. I floundered on, hot and uncomfortable.

"The Duchess of Pendleton has kindly

placed her shooting-box at our—the Princess's disposal. It is more private than Oban. There is less risk of a scandal——”

“A scandal!” ejaculated the Princess.

“I mean,” I said hurriedly, “you are less likely to be recognized there than in Oban. There is no object in giving rise to idle talk.”

“That is true,” said Mina thoughtfully.

“Yes, I quite agree with you, Mr. Chapman. Where is the shooting-box?”

“It is at Dalavich, only fifteen miles or so from here.”

“If there's any shooting, I'm ready,” said the Princess.

“We don't shoot in England during June,” I had to explain, “except rabbits.”

“They'll do,” said the Princess, graciously.

“Mina, let's go. I'm dreadfully tired of this pokey little place. Can we start to-morrow?”

Mina looked towards Wilhelm, who nodded.

“Very well, Mr. Chapman,” she said, “we are at your disposal.”

“The wedding can take place at Dalavich as well as anywhere else, I suppose,” remarked the Princess, indifferently.

Mina looked uncomfortable, and Wilhelm gazed out of the window. Again I felt the time had come for a strong line.

"The question of your marriage must remain for the time being in abeyance," I said firmly.

The Princess looked up, and—yes, put out her tongue.

I rose. There are some arguments to which no answer is possible. "When will you be ready to start to-morrow?" I said, pointedly addressing Mina. "I will order a conveyance, and we will drive there."

"After lunch," said Mina, after a moment's thought. "Say three o'clock. Will that suit everyone?" The question was general, but she glanced at Wilhelm.

Again my foot had to be put down. I began to be proud of myself.

"There is only the Princess and yourself to consider," I said.

"What, isn't Wilhelm coming?" cried the Princess.

"Certainly not," said I.

"Then I don't go either."

A dead silence followed. I examined the nails on my right hand with interest. Wilhelm smelt the sunflower abstractedly.

"I—I think perhaps we had better go," said Mina.

Wilhelm turned. "Yes, it is best—for the present."

"Oh, of course, if you wish it," said the

Princess. "But I shall be bored to death if you are not there. Mr. Chapman has not a great fund of interesting conversation, I'm afraid. But you will come over and see us often?"

"I think there will be no objection to that," said Wilhelm looking at me.

"Oh, none at all," I replied rather reluctantly. I could not expect him to keep away from Mina altogether.

As there seemed nothing more to be said, I picked up my hat and bowed my adieux to the ladies. Wilhelm rose at once. "I'm coming also," he said.

"I think you might stay a little," pouted the Princess. "You are not a very devoted lover."

Wilhelm smiled good-naturedly. "Ah, no," he answered. "But I am under terms with our arch-enemy here."

As we walked homewards towards our hotel, we passed a post-office. I turned to Wilhelm suddenly, and asked him if he had a photograph of the Princess. He answered in the negative.

"If you will excuse me," I said, precipitately, "I will send a wire."

He laughed. "Do you know, I can almost always read your thoughts?"

"I am going to wire to the caretaker at

the lodge to prepare for our arrival," I said stiffly.

"Then I am mistaken."

But probably he was not.

CHAPTER XII

THE ROAD TO DALAVICH

THERE was a brisk breeze blowing and a blue sky overhead, with white clouds scampering across it, when I arrived the next day at Myra Cottage with the vehicle which was to carry us to the Duchess's shooting lodge. It was the best conveyance I could obtain—a brake seated for six a side and drawn by a pair of horses. The Princess elected to seat herself by the coachman, and took her place with the exhibition of not a little petticoat and two substantial boots. Mina and I sat facing each in a corner seat near the door, while the remainder of the interior was piled up with baggage of one kind or another.

I had not seen Wilhelm since breakfast that morning. He had told me, with apparent frankness, that he had sent a note to Mina asking her to meet him at the Harbour, provided I had no objection. I made none.

As I sat rather furtively watching her face,

I wondered what the subject of their conversation had been. Had he told her of our joint plan—to get her married to him at the earliest moment? Did she know I had engaged myself to provide her with a dowry? And if she knew, what did she think of it? She looked very charming, sitting before me, with long eyelashes shading her downcast eyes. A sudden compunction seized me. She was too good for Wilhelm.

We soon left Oban and its environments, and drove through pleasant moorlands with the heather not yet in bloom. I ventured at length to comment on the beauty of our surroundings, and Mina assented briefly, but she did not seem inclined to continue the conversation.

"I hope," I said, "you realize I am trying to act for the best."

"I understand you are obeying your instructions."

"You are not annoyed because I have forced you away from Oban?"

A flash came into her eyes. "You have not forced me to do anything. I came willingly."

"And the Princess?"

"The Princess leaves herself in my hands. She does not think. I have to think for her. Something had to be done. The fact is, we

are almost without money. There is no reason why I should not tell you the truth."

"If I had not appeared on the scene, what would you have done?"

"I do not know. We have sold most of our jewellery."

"Are you really as badly off as that?" I asked with surprise.

"Yes."

"Then," said I, "if things had been left as they were, the Princess would perhaps have been obliged to return to her father?"

Her lips were compressed. "She would never have done that."

"What then?"

"Wilhelm would have arranged something, though I am afraid the poor fellow is not much better off than we are."

"It was a mad scheme of the Princess to run away from her home."

She looked at me with a sudden frown.

"Would you have had her remain to be married to a man she loathed?"

"Certainly not," I answered. "I quite agree it is outrageous to talk of marriage where the Princess is concerned. She is far too young and—and unformed."

She smiled. "Poor Dobbs!"

"She ought to be at school—a very strict ladies' school."

"The Princess will soon grow old," said Mina, "and adversity is the strictest school, after all."

"That will be her school, if she marries Wilhelm."

Mina moved restlessly. "I trust you will spare me any criticisms of Wilhelm."

"I beg your pardon," I murmured. For the moment I had forgotten that she loved him. We were silent again, and then I thought of setting a trap for Mina.

"Why do you object to the Princess marrying the Duke of Hanau?" I asked.

She opened her eyes in astonishment. "How can you ask that? Because she does not love him."

She had stepped into it.

"You think love should always go with marriage?" I continued with guile.

"Of course."

"Love on both sides?" I would leave no loophole.

"Without doubt."

"Wilhelm does not love the Princess," I said triumphantly. "On your own showing their marriage should be prevented."

She stared at me, and then she burst into a little ripple of laughter. "Whom does he love, then?"

"He loves you."

The scarlet deepened on her cheeks, but the smile did not leave her lips.

"How can you know that?"

"He told me."

She turned her head away, but I could see she was not ill-pleased.

"And if I had not been told," I went on, "I should have guessed it."

"You are an acute observer." There was a note of mockery in her voice which vexed me.

"I have guessed something more," I said.

"And that is——?"

"That you love him."

Her smile faded from her face. "I think you guess too much," she said coldly.

"But do I guess wrongly?"

Her eyes met mine, and there was a look of trouble in their clear depths. "I do not know. Honestly, I am not sure."

"Surely your heart tells you?"

"No, my heart is dumb. It is strange to speak to you in this fashion, but, after all, the circumstances are not quite ordinary. If I were sure I loved Wilhelm, I think the difficulties which distress and disturb me would clear away. If I were only sure!" She seemed to fall into a dream. I cannot give reasons, but when she hinted a doubt as to her love for Wilhelm my heart gave a leap.

"Ah, yes, you love him," I said a little mournfully. "He is very good-looking."

"There are many handsome faces in the world," said she, looking at me.

"He is very fascinating."

"Indeed he is. But fascination and love are not quite the same."

"He has very pleasant manners."

"That is, indeed, unusual in men—some men."

Was she snubbing me? I reddened, and retired into myself.

It was she who resumed the conversation.

"Suppose I admit all you say about Wilhelm, what then?"

"Then why not marry him?"

"You advise me to do so?"

I gulped down something. "Yes."

We were passing through a valley sheltered on either side. The sun seemed to have grown hotter overhead. She opened her sunshade and let it trail idly over her shoulder. The reflection of the red lining gave an additional tinge of colour to her face.

"Have you any sisters?" she asked suddenly.

"No."

"Is there any woman in the world who is very dear to you?"

I considered. "No, not one."

"Ah, then I cannot put your advice to the test."

"What test?"

"If you had a very dear sister, I should have asked you whether you would have liked to see her married to Wilhelm."

I felt a sudden embarrassment. "It would not be a fair test."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"But do you know what your answer would be?"

A sudden gust of wrath took possession of me. "My answer would be that I would rather see her dead," I said vehemently.

She turned on me sharply. "You have no right to speak of Wilhelm in that tone. You know you have nothing against him. It is unmanly of you." Her anger had made her pale, despite the pink parasol. "Why did you say that?"

"You entrapped me into saying it," I replied sullenly. "I daresay I spoke too strongly. I should not like a sister of mine to marry him because of his past record and because I distrust him."

Her anger faded swiftly. "Distrust?" she repeated slowly. "Does that mean a little lurking doubt that peeps out now and

again, when he is absent, and dies away utterly when he is present."

"Well, I do feel like that," I admitted, "though I am not sure his presence entirely removes my distrust. Certainly I realize his personal charm or magnetism, or whatever it ought to be called. But it is not only an indefinable feeling which makes me doubt him. If I judge him adversely, it is on the facts of his past life."

"Facts!" she repeated scornfully. "Facts confided to you by his affectionate father, who turned him out of his home."

"Certainly, his father is my informant," I admitted.

"And yet, with all his black faults, you consider him good enough for the like of me," she said contemptuously.

"He is not good enough for you," I answered, with conviction.

"And yet you want me to marry him?"

"Before I knew you, I thought it would be a good plan if you were to marry him—to save the Princess," I replied lamely enough. How had I allowed myself to get into this awkward tangle?

"You are willing to jeopardize my future happiness to save the Princess? Of course, I am only a poor, friendless governess, who has to battle for her daily bread, and I

suppose I don't count. Yet it doesn't strike me as very noble of you to sacrifice one who never did you any harm."

"But you love him!" I cried in desperation. "And he loves you. Surely in these circumstances——"

She suddenly smiled on me with great sweetness. "Have it your own way, Mr. Chapman. Marry me to whom you please. When can the matter be arranged? I must say, though, that I should have thought a strong, healthy young man might have found a less effeminate occupation than match-making. Still, as you have set your mind on this marriage——"

"I do not like sarcasm," I said loftily.

"Nor am I enamoured with meddling."

"My duty is to the Princess."

"She will be delighted with so stalwart a champion."

"She needs one," I said bitterly, "for you, whom she trusts, seem indifferent to her reputation."

"No one has ever spoken a word against her reputation," she cried, suddenly aflame.

"Her marriage with Wilhelm would be a result must be shame and
hers—and to her—to others."

is untrue," she responded calmly.
to not lie."

"No, but you accept the lies of others. The marriage would be perfectly legal in England, and she would remain in England."

"I am no lawyer," I answered. "I only know that in the country of her birth she would be deemed an outcast."

"Perhaps she is prepared to accept even infamy for the man she loves. Many a woman has done so."

"She is a mere child, and you, who are older, have a duty to protect her from herself until she reaches years of discretion."

"In your opinion," she said slowly, "I ought to marry Wilhelm to protect the Princess from herself?"

Only a few minutes before I had answered in the affirmative, but now the monosyllable stuck in my throat. I opened my mouth to say it, but no word came.

"Your silence gives assent," she said. I could only look at her helplessly.

At that moment the Princess turned in her seat to shout a suggestion that we should all alight and roll on the beautiful heather. Mina discouraged the notion, and the conveyance proceeded. But a barrier of silence had sprung up between Mina and myself, and I sat sullenly opposite to her, pretending to be engrossed in my own thoughts, but all the

while watching my chance to steal a glance at the perfect profile of a girl whom I had seen for the first time yesterday, and to-day was beginning to regard with feelings that I could not analyze.

The brake made its way between low-lying hills, with stretches of moor on either side, and past an occasional farm-house, jogging on at an even pace. On the box, the Princess had incited the driver to a seemingly amusing conversation, for his hoarse chuckle broke occasionally on my ear. A sudden swerve to the side made me look up, and I found that the Princess had taken command of the reins and the whip, and our pace was increasing considerably. However, I could hardly conceive an accident, from even the most erratic driving, with our two time-worn horses, and I was glad the Princess was finding amusement on the journey. We rolled on for an hour, until we found ourselves at the village of Dalavich. It was a quiet little place, with one street and an ivy-covered church, standing peacefully amongst gravestones.

"These are the nearest habitations to my prison," the Princess informed me over her shoulder. "We leave civilization when we leave them. May we stop and have some tea? I should like to have tea just once more before you start me on bread and water."

She pulled up opposite the church. "Isn't that a charming old kirk? I think we might have the marriage there."

"How can you be married there or anywhere if you are to be locked up in a prison?" I asked.

"Oh, of course, I shall escape," she answered gravely, "in the dead of night and a dressing-gown. Mina, will you go and find the parson and arrange the details? I'll drive on and order tea."

I was glad of the chance of escaping from a constraint that had become irksome; so I alighted, and after a moment's hesitation Mina followed. The Princess whipped up the horses and drove down the village street, pulling up before a homely little inn. I watched her descend and disappear within the swinging doors.

"Would you like to walk in the churchyard?" I asked Mina.

"If you like."

So we entered. "It is very pleasant here," I said to break the silence.

"Could we not go into the church? The sun is rather strong."

I tried to open the door, but it was locked. Evidently, however, our movements were under observation from one of the windows of the manse adjoining, for in a few minutes

a pleasant old gentleman appeared, carrying a bunch of keys.

"You wish to see the interior?" he asked.

"Thank you very much."

"People often come from Oban, and even longer distances, to see the monuments," he said with pride, as he unlocked the door.

"They are quite remarkable. There is some old carving, too, which is considered unique."

Mina regarded the new-comer with interest.

"Are you the minister?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do you marry people?"

He seemed a little surprised. "It is one of my duties." His eyes travelled from Mina to myself, and he smiled sympathetically.

"My parish extends for many miles, and most of those you meet hereabouts were baptized here and will be buried here."

"And married here?"

"If they desire it."

Mina tapped her toe thoughtfully on the paving of the aisle.

"Is it a long process?"

"It takes but a very few minutes," he answered, "but the effect lasts till death."

"And death is sometimes so long in coming," said Mina thoughtfully.

The old gentleman was evidently a little

shocked, and began somewhat hastily to tell us the history of the inmates of the tombs, and to point out objects which were no doubt of great interest.

"I am thinking of getting married," observed Mina, suddenly.

"To this gentleman?" suggested the minister pleasantly.

"Oh, no." Mina laughed lightly. "This gentleman is—is my brother."

"Oh, indeed!" said the minister, a little disappointed. His interest in me diminished, but in Mina it increased. "To some other gentleman?"

"Yes, to another gentleman." Mina picked up a book of devotion and opened it abstractedly. "I suppose," said she, with her eye on the printed page, "you would marry us if we wanted it."

"Why, yes," said the minister. "I should have to do so, if the proper forms were complied with. Not," he added politely, "that it would not be a great pleasure."

"The proper forms? And what are they?"

"Well," he answered, "certain papers will have to be filled in with the names, and the intention of marriage must be proclaimed from the pulpit on three Sabbaths."

"Could you," asked Mina, "let me have the forms?"

"Certainly."

"Now?"

"I can get them for you."

"If you please," said Mina.

The good man, evidently not a little astonished, went away on his errand, leaving Mina and myself standing together.

"I—I don't think you should act without the fullest consideration," I quavered.

"Surely it is your own suggestion?"

"Yes, I know—but——"

"Dear Mr. Chapman, don't tell me that a strong, healthy young man like yourself does not know his own mind two minutes running."

"Why," I said angrily, "do you persistently allude to my health and my youth?"

"They are your two most noticeable attributes."

I decided I had over-estimated Mina's charms. After all, she was welcome to marry whom she liked. I was sure I didn't care.

"I hope you will be happy," I said coldly.

"I am sure it would distress you to think you had forced me into an unhappy marriage."

"I wash my hands of the whole affair," I said hotly. "You must not accuse me of forcing you to do anything of the kind."

"Why, you yourself——"

"It was a mere suggestion," I cried, "a mere casual suggestion. It is perfectly absurd

to say I have forced you to marry. People don't rush into matrimony because total strangers happen to make a random remark."

"Here is the kind old gentleman with a handful of papers. I do hope you will help me to fill them in. I am so stupid about official forms."

When the minister came up to us, she thanked him very sweetly, and listened with interest to his explanations.

"I suppose," she observed, "I must wait three weeks. There is no quicker way?"

"Oh, yes, there are quicker ways," said the minister. "Are you in a very great hurry?"

"Personally," said Mina, with a detached air, "I am in no hurry at all. In fact, I do not want to be married. But my brother insists upon it."

The minister regarded me with a grave face. "On such a matter, surely your sister should be allowed to follow her own inclinations. Marriage is a solemn business."

"So far as I am concerned," I answered coldly, "this young lady is free to do what she pleases. She has given you an entirely false view of the situation."

Mina shook her head sorrowfully. "I have annoyed my dear brother. Perhaps I should not have spoken even to a minister on these

private family matters." She sighed. "After all, his choice is probably the right one. He has excellent taste. And at any rate"—she brightened—"my future husband is called Wilhelm, and I am very fond of the name."

"Wilhelm?" repeated the minister.
"Not a foreigner, I hope?"

"Oh, yes, a foreigner," replied Mina; "and I am told his record is not very favourable. Still, my brother does not think I can do better."

I was in a towering rage, and turning on my heel, made for the door. Mina followed me almost directly with the minister, who bade me farewell with a stiff bow, but shook Mina warmly by the hand, assuring her she could rely on him at any time.

As we walked down the road towards the inn, I preserved a haughty silence. During tea, Mina and the Princess chatted freely, but I refused to relax.

"Our policeman," said the Princess, stuffing bread and butter into her mouth in anything but a lady-like manner, "has swallowed a poker."

"I will not let you tease Mr. Chapman," said Mina, severely. "He is in a very difficult position, and he is trying to do his duty. I feel for him."

The Princess spluttered with laughter.

"It is time to go," I said, starting up.

"I'll fetch the carriage," cried the Princess. "Will you pay the bill, Mr. Policeman?" She scurried out of the room.

"You are not really angry?" asked Mina, glancing at me with a roguish twinkle in her eyes.

"I dislike," I said, ringing the bell, "the female humorist."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHOOTING LODGE

THE shooting lodge was a converted farm-house. It was a plain, unpretentious two-storied building, with a barn and byre behind it, and stabling for four horses. The caretaker was a middle-aged woman, answering to the name of Annie. She was the widow of a gamekeeper who had been shot in the back by a short-sighted Cabinet Minister, who took him for a stag. Fortunately for the feelings of the right honourable gentleman, Annie's husband postponed his decease for some months after the accident, and then the medical certificate gave alcoholic poisoning as the cause of death. But Annie knew better. The portrait of the Minister hung in the kitchen by the side of that of his victim, and Annie

loved to tell the story of the slayer and the slain in an unimpassioned, uninflected monotone which was most wearisome to hear. I never was able to appreciate her mental attitude towards the alleged destroyer of her domestic felicity. It would be wrong to suggest that she approved the error which she was convinced had cost her a husband ; but truth to say, she did not seem to lament the mischance. It was the incident of her life. I suppose if an accurate balance could have been struck of the joys and sorrows of her uneventful and attenuated life, it would have been found that the joy of the narration had long since outweighed the bitterness of the bereavement. She spent the best part of her leisure time plodding through the columns of newspapers in search of the name of the individual whose sporting rifle had played its part in her history.

"The Right Honourable James MacCud-die," she would say, in her faded voice, "has made a braw speech at Edinbro' on the Fiscal Question. Ay, but he's an able man ! "

We heard the whole story at breakfast time the morning following our arrival. Annie stood by the doorway, and as she spoke looked vacantly out of the window.

Mina, at the outset, under the impression we were being treated to a tragedy, ventured on vague expressions of sympathy, but these received no recognition. We soon found out that it was the tribute of wonderment that touched the good woman's heart. The enquiries of the Princess as to the size of the wound, its exact locality, and whether it had bled much, gave great pleasure. Her endeavour to estimate the bore of the rifle from Annie's diagram on the tablecloth caused more than a momentary flicker of joy to pass over the good woman's face.

"It couldn't have been a rifle," declared the Princess with conviction, when Annie had left the room. "He must have been fired at with a pom-pom."

I found that the Duchess had given Annie minute instructions as to our comfort. Annie had received word that some friends of the Duchess might possibly make a visit to the lodge, and that she was to take her orders from me alone. It had been a surprise to Annie when one man and two ladies had appeared, for she had jumped to the conclusion that all the visitors were to be of the male sex. From motives of convenience, I decided to adopt Mina's fiction of our relationship, which I extended by adding the Princess to my family. Mr. Chapman, and the two Misses Chapman,

were therefore the occupants of the lodge, and all that remained for me to do was to make the best of the situation until such time as the Count thought fit to relieve me of my family ties.

The Princess was the only one of us who seemed from the first to settle down with the utmost content in our new surroundings. Immediately after breakfast on the day following our arrival, she disappeared on a tour of inspection. Mina had withdrawn to her room, and I sat down to write a detailed account of the situation to my employer. I found it difficult to convey in modest words the masterly part I had played, and the consummate skill with which I was solving a difficult problem. I wrote a very long letter, describing in many words the appearance both of the Princess and of Mina to prevent any possibility of deception on the score of identity, although, as a matter of fact, my suspicions had vanished. Just as I finished, a tap at the window made me look up, to find the Princess peering in at the window. It was evidently her desire to speak to me, and I therefore opened the old-fashioned casement. The house was built on rising ground, and the drop from the window-sill to the garden was quite six feet. The Princess was standing tip-toe on a flower-pot, inverted on a

wheelbarrow. From this dangerous altitude she addressed me.

"I can no longer disguise from you, Mr. Chapman," she said, "that I like you."

"I am very glad to hear it."

"You may call me Dobbs, if you wish to. You are my brother, you know."

"Perhaps it will be as well," I answered gravely.

"What is your Christian name, Mr. Chapman?"

"Oswald."

"A very pretty name," she answered graciously. "Will you do something for me, Oswald?"

"Ah," I replied grimly, "I guessed you wanted something."

She wobbled on her perch, and gave a tremendous leap to save herself. "There is such a nice boy digging potatoes down by that cottage," she continued from the ground, as if nothing had happened. "He is the son of a gilly, and do you know, he keeps a ferret in a rabbit hutch?"

"And why not?" I asked.

"What is the good of a ferret without a gun?" she queried, eyeing me side-ways. "His father has a gun."

"Lots of people have guns."

"But the silly man won't lend it to me, or

any cartridges, or the ferret, or allow his son to help me unless—"

"Unless?"

"Unless you approve."

"Oh, I see."

"I liked you the moment I saw you, Oswald. You have such a nice face. You do approve, don't you?"

I considered. "I hope you won't hurt yourself."

"I knew you were good-natured," she exclaimed delightedly. "Would you mind shouting 'All right'?" She indicated a man working outside a cottage standing some hundred yards away. I shouted as desired, and she joined in the shout in the heartiest way possible. When the man showed he had heard us, she skipped away, without stopping to pay any more useless compliments.

I returned to my letter, which I sealed and addressed. Suddenly I realised that I was feeling lonely. Why did not Mina join me? A walk with her in the morning sunshine could not be unpleasant. I went outside and waited impatiently, but she did not appear. I smoked for half-an-hour, with growing irritation, until a step made me look up. Alas, it was Wilhelm!

"Good morning," said he.

"Good morning," I answered. And then, as if by magic, Mina appeared in walking costume.

"Will you come for a walk, Mina?" he asked.

"I was just thinking it is far too fine a morning to waste in-doors," she replied.

Why had she not thought so an hour ago?

"Come, then," he said; and they went off together, and I was left alone, a solitary and ill-used mortal.

I spent a restless morning, unable to settle down to any occupation, preferring to moon about the house and smoke incessantly. Even Annie took pity on my melancholy state, and regaled me with further details of the story with which I was already familiar. Amongst other things, she mentioned that the Right Hon. James MacCuddie was to address a public meeting in Oban in the course of a few weeks, and she hinted her desire to be present. I consented at once, and only wished the date was not so far removed. The hour of our mid-day meal had been fixed for one o'clock, and I watched the clock with impatience—not that I was hungry, except for social intercourse. When the hour came and my "sister" was still absent, my irritation

overstepped bounds, and I am afraid I was rude to Annie, who wanted to read me extracts from a speech her idol had made some days previously. My annoyance was beginning to give place to alarm when the Princess turned up, glowing with excitement, and bearing with her the stiff corpses of two rabbits.

"I shot them both," she cried, flopping them down on the white tablecloth, from which they were summarily removed by Annie. "Can you cook rabbits, Annie?"

Annie admitted she could.

"I hope you will be very careful with their skins," said the Princess anxiously. "I shall have them stuffed. Oh Oswald, this is a delightful place!"

"I am finding it a little slow," I said.

She was full of regret. "Why didn't you come with me? I've been having a splendid time. Where's Mina?"

"She is with Wilhelm." I watched her face narrowly to see if any spasm of jealousy passed over it, but she seemed genuinely indifferent.

"Oh, he's turned up, has he?" she answered off-handedly. "Have you ever shot a rabbit?"

"Oh, yes."

"Isn't it splendid to see them go head-

over-heels if you hit 'em fair? I do hate, though, to see them quiver afterwards. That takes away some of the pleasure, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes," I replied abstractedly, watching through the window for the return of Mina.

"It's not really cruel, though," she explained hastily. "I have thought it out. Think of a poor rabbit having to die of old age in its burrow. Can't you imagine the poor little thing, sitting all hunched up, waiting to die, with a glaze over its eyes? Oh, I think a film creeping over an animal's eye is a most awful thing. And rabbits must die like that if you don't shoot them."

"I suppose they must."

"And all their relations—their own children even—are so cruel to a rabbit that is ill. They bite it and kick it. Looking at it from that point of view, it is really rather a duty to shoot rabbits. Don't you think so?"

"Certainly." I tried to be interested in her conversation. "Did you miss any?"

"Well," she answered candidly, "I missed most. In fact, I missed all except these two, and Tom had to run after one of them and hit

it with a stick. Tom killed four, but then, of course, he knows his father's gun. He offered to sell me his ferret for ten shillings. I do wish I had ten shillings." She glanced at me sideways.

"I can let you have any money you want," I said quickly. The notion of a daughter of a royal house not having any money shocked me.

"How good you are! And may I buy the rabbit-hutch as well, and keep the ferret here?"

"If you want to."

"I should like it dearly. Tom is a very nice boy, but I had to box his ears for laughing at me for missing so often. I shall be a better shot than he is before I leave. It's a splendid place, and I'm so much obliged to you for bringing me here."

"I wonder where Mina is," I said.

"Oh, with Wilhelm, I suppose."

I looked at the Princess quickly. "Don't you mind?"

She seemed to remember something. "Well, so long as he is engaged to me, I don't see that it matters. I don't believe in engaged people seeing too much of one another. Oh, Tom says the top of that hill yonder is a splendid place for picnics. Would you mind our taking tea there every day? Annie

could make up a basket of things, and Mina has a spirit lamp. Annie, you've got a basket, haven't you?" And she disappeared into the kitchen.

I was looking rather furtively through the window, for Mina and Wilhelm had come into sight. They paused at the little wooden gate that led to the entrance. I watched him with hate in my heart. What a lot he had to say to her! Why did she not come in? Lunch was more than half an hour late as it was. It was really very inconsiderate—Oh, he was kissing her! I fell into an armchair, in order that I might not witness the harrowing spectacle.

In a few minutes Mina appeared, with a glow on her cheeks. I knew what had produced that glow. She smiled cheerfully on me.

"How gloomy you look!" she said.

"Not in the least," I answered. "I am in the highest spirits."

"Really? I have news which will brighten you still more."

"What is it?"

"It is arranged. I have consented. In about three weeks——"

"So soon!" I cried.

She took off her hat, and smoothed her hair at the glass.

"What a colour I have!" she observed, and smiled at her own image.

"So soon! So soon!"

"Wilhelm would not stop to lunch," remarked Mina. "He is bicycling back to Oban, and did not want to be late. Besides, he has arrangements to make."

"So soon!"

"It cannot seem soon to you," she answered petulantly. "I suppose you keep repeating these words like a parrot from some mistaken notion that they are complimentary to me."

"God help you!" I said.

"Are you trying to be rude," asked Mina, "or is this your natural manner?"

At that moment Annie came in with a steaming bowl of cock-a-leekie soup. And then the Princess bounded in. I could eat nothing. So soon! Oh, the pity of it!

Our meal was scarcely over before the Princess dashed away. Tom was to teach her to fish with a fly in a neighbouring burn, and she could only stop for a moment to ascertain that Annie was expert in cooking trout. Mina and I were left at the table face to face.

"You are not a great conversationalist, are you?" observed Mina. "But I suppose you think a good deal."

"Yes, I am thinking a good deal," I assented.

"The responsibility of your position bears heavily on your young life."

"My young life is older than yours," I responded tartly.

She rose from her seat, and when she spoke her voice was softer than usual. "You think me very heartless, don't you?" she said, and came behind me and placed her hand lightly on my shoulder. "I won't tease you again if you will only clear that troubled look from off your face. Don't you see how my worries have taken wings? My heart is so light that I could sing."

"What has changed you?"

"I have discovered I love Wilhelm," she answered simply. "I was never sure till this morning, but now I am sure. I love him! I am certain I love him!"

"And you think this should make me want to sing too?" I said bitterly. "What a duet we might have!"

"A brother," she whispered, and bent so that I felt her breath on my cheek, "should rejoice in his sister's happiness."

I stared moodily in front of me, and did not answer for some minutes.

"A brother," I said at length, "dreads a sister's unhappiness."

She had picked up her hat and gloves preparatory to leaving the room. "He need have no fear for that," she said, turning at the door, "for love makes all the difference."

A day or two later the Princess insisted on her picnic tea at the top of the hill. Tom carried the basket, the Princess bore some cushions, while I followed with the tea-kettle. Mina sauntered up unencumbered. Wilhelm had not put in an appearance again, and the little cloud on Mina's face might not unreasonably be ascribed to his absence. She and I had stopped bickering. With a gentle consideration, she seemed to try to make things easy for me. I sometimes thought that, for some inscrutable reason, she had begun to pity me. At first the thought offended me, but the charm of her friendliness soon disarmed my pride, and I found myself struggling more and more feebly against a blind and wistful infatuation.

It was a charming day. The bright sunshine, the light breeze, the heather with its promise of bloom, the stretch of landscape, with the range of distant hills fading into a blue haze, the loch reflecting the sun and fed by the burn, for all the world like a golden shield with a silver cord, and above all, Mina near me, was surely enough to raise me to that height of bliss, a

contented melancholy. We had finished tea, and the Princess had disappeared with Tom. Mina and I sat idly watching the sun dipping towards the hills.

"We are a mournful couple, aren't we?" said Mina, breaking the silence. "You, with a heart-rending expression on your face, say nothing. And I——"

"You don't look particularly cheerful yourself," I retorted. "But I suppose that is because Wilhelm has not turned up."

"You are quite wrong," she made answer. "I was happy the other day because I had attended the funeral of a little imp of doubt that had haunted my brain. I buried him deep, because I was convinced he was dead. To-day——"

"Ah, what has happened to-day?" I cried, sitting up.

"There is a movement in the mould, and I fear every moment to see his grinning face peep out."

"You are not sure——" I edged nearer her in my eagerness. "You think that perhaps——"

She turned on me almost fiercely. "I believe it is you who have brought that imp to life. Your insinuations, your troubled eyes, your fears for my future. Why can't you leave me alone? What am I to you?"

We have known each other for a few days only. In a fortnight, we part never to meet again. What right have you to take an interest in me? I am nothing to you."

It was on my lips to say she was everything to me, but I refrained.

"It was you who gave me the name of brother," I said. "Do I fit the rôle too perfectly?"

Her face softened. "I think any girl might be proud to have you for a brother. How kind and considerate you would be to a sister! And you have none?"

"No, thank God!"

"Why do you say that?"

I was silent. I could not tell her that I was glad no sister had to share with me the burden of my parentage.

"At the same time," she went on, regarding me with kind eyes, "I think if I had the choice of relationships, I should not become your sister."

"What then?" I asked, full of a preposterous hope.

"I think I should like to be your mother."

"Oh, indeed," said I, mightily irate.

"Any woman would be glad to have a son like you," she went on, dreamily. "So good and kind and simple and honest. Yes,

if ever I have a son, I would wish him to be like you."

"I am not so simple or so honest as you think," I cried indignantly.

"Tell me what your mother was like, Oswald. I am interested in her. I think I can imagine her. A tall, stately woman, very gentle and good, spending her time amongst the poor people of the district—the mainstay of the local vicar. I think she must have always dressed simply, with lovely old lace. Am I right?"

"I am an illegitimate child," I said bluntly. It was my foolish pride that made me blurt out the one thing of all others which I most wished to conceal—a pride that scorned secrecy, because it dreaded exposure.

Mina glanced at me quickly, and the blood spread over her face.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I have hurt you. I am sorry."

"You have not hurt me," I answered. "There is no reason why you should not know that. I am not ashamed." And yet I was bitterly ashamed.

"It is nothing to your discredit," she said, but her eyes were full of pity.

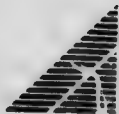
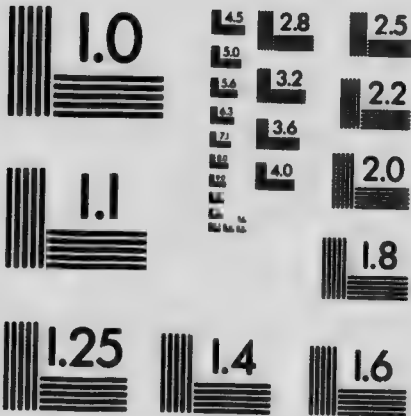
"It is only one more barrier between us," I said.

She considered my remark for some min-



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utes. "Why is it a barrier?" she asked at length. "I am only a poor governess. In the class from which I spring birth counts for so little."

I pointed to the figure of a bicyclist down in the valley. "I believe that is Wilhelm."

She looked. "I think you are right." There was no eagerness in her tone. She sighed again. "I suppose we ought to be getting home. It is very pleasant sitting here."

CHAPTER XIV

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

THE days went quickly by with a charm all their own. The only drawback to the joy of the fleeting hours was the too frequent visits of Wilhelm. Although I made up my mind that I cordially detested him, yet, in his presence, I felt myself under the influence of his personal magnetism. The spell he exercised was indefinable, though sometimes I tried to analyze it. On occasions I decided it lay in his courteous indifference to myself. At another time, I thought it lay in his good-humoured cynicism, which mocked unaggressively at the world around him. Again, I determined it sprang naturally from his good looks, or perhaps from the vein of comicality in his conversation. But I usually came to the conclusion that its true source was to be found in a hidden strength of mind and character.

I was in almost daily communication with

the Count, and this fact gave me a distinct sense of security. I could not be going far wrong, so long as he knew and sanctioned. In elaborate reports, I detailed to him every incident which could be supposed to have even a slight bearing on the matter in hand. He cordially approved of the purposed marriage between his son and Mina, and the flattering remarks with which he rewarded my efforts in this direction were extremely gratifying. In response to my request, he enclosed a copy of the most recent photograph of the Princess, and my doubts, if I had any, were put to rest. He gave me in one of his letters a summary of Mina's history. She had been left an orphan at an early age, and the late Grand Duchess had interested herself in her behalf at the instance of Mina's god-mother, who had made the Duchess's acquaintance at a German Spa. He told me of the favourable opinions Mina had won in the ducal palace during the year she had been an inmate as the Princess's companion. It was with an approach to fervour he expressed his thankfulness that his unworthy son was choosing so admirable a mate.

Wilhelm and I always met as good friends. In fact, we four passed our days in amicable fashion, apparently enjoying each other's companionship, although in my case, as in

Mina's case, there were moments of gloom and depression, coming quickly, as a fog gathers, and clearing away as suddenly. We made many excursions together, fished and boated together on the loch. We rambled contentedly over the country-side, though I admit I was happier when Wilhelm was not with us. Sometimes he and Mina would stroll off in company, and I would sicken with jealousy, and frown and mope till their return. But it was not often this happened, for Mina seemed to prefer to keep the party complete, and seldom allowed even the conversation to become other than general.

By a tacit understanding, Wilhelm and I refrained from discussing the sordid elements of our bargain. But one day we happened to be alone, and I dashed into the subject which was never far from my thoughts.

"I suppose you haven't changed your mind about this marriage?" I said, with a miserable pretence at off-handedness.

He looked at me with amused surprise. "Good gracious, no."

"Is it still a matter of money with you?"

"Oh, yes."

"How much money," I asked, looking away from him, "should you want not to marry Mina?"

He laughed quite heartily. "My dear lad, are you also a victim to her charms?"

"Not at all," I answered, blushing furiously. "You make a great mistake. But——"

"But what?"

"I know her now. I didn't know her at the time of our—arrangement. I dislike the notion of—of selling her."

"She loves me. You have done her the greatest service in the world. You need have no fear of her reproaches."

"It is not fair to her," I cried vehemently. "Ah, do give the notion up! I will give you the money just the same."

"You mean you want me to marry the Princess instead?" he asked, regarding me attentively.

"Oh, no, not that," I said hastily. "Give them both up. Why not? Sign an undertaking promising never to marry the Princess, and I will trust you and pay you."

He shook his head. "I would rather give up the five thousand pounds than give up Mina. Don't you realise what love is?"

"You loved her a fortnight ago, and yet it was the Princess you talked of marrying," I cried.

"I never intended to marry any one except Mina," he responded calmly. "I certainly

did intend to frighten my dear father into the payment of a considerable sum of money, but that was only in the way of business."

"Very well, then," I said; "if that is so, why should I pay you anything? On your own admission, the Princess is safe."

"Oh, but I have your word of honour, my dear young friend. I can trust that."

"I am not so sure."

"Then poor Mina must rough it, for I am going to marry her, although you refuse to give me a penny."

I groaned despondently. I found no comfort in the placid determination on his face.

"I can't see," I said, a little childishly, "why you can't be reasonable. If you give them both up, perhaps I might increase my offer."

He rested a hand for one moment on my shoulder. "Oswald, my dear boy," he said, "I am haunted with one terrible dread. It is to appear melodramatic. There is a latent tendency in me which makes me want to pose and say magnificent things. I repress it strongly, for melodrama is the essence of vulgarity. Will you give me credit for being perfectly natural if I tell you the simple truth? My love for Mina is the one abiding, overwhelming force in my nature. I would go through hell for her—or even ascend to

heaven. What more can I say? Can you understand?" The stem of his pipe snapped suddenly. "Look," he added, "I have broken my favourite pipe. Surely you need no further proof of my sincerity."

I felt suddenly chilled. Without appearing in earnest, he impressed me by his intense earnestness.

"How many days yet?" I asked miserably.

"Only five. I trust you will be present at our very modest nuptials."

"Certainly not," I cried, distressed at the notion.

"Well, well," said he, "I must perforce do without a best man."

We were sitting together in front of the lodge on the edge of the moorland which ran almost up to the door. It was Mina's favourite spot for tea, and a little rustic table was already spread with tea-things. At that moment Annie came out of the front door with a steaming earthenware tea-pot, and Mina strolled towards us across the heather. I rose, anxious to get away, for my nerves were quivering.

"Tea, Oswald?" asked Mina.

"No, thanks," I answered shortly.

She gave me a quick look, and then she glanced at Wilhelm.

"I hope you two haven't been quarrelling?"

Wilhelm yawned. "I never quarrel when I am smoking. But I have broken my pipe; so perhaps it is lucky you have turned up."

"What have you been talking about?"

Wilhelm flung a pebble at an audacious calf that seemed to take Annie for its mother.

"The irrevocable past and the inevitable future. Dear Oswald laments the one and bemoans the other. He sometimes reminds me of a Lutheran pastor."

Mina paused with the tea-pot in her hand. "Oswald," she said, "don't stare so stonily at the distant horizon. Don't you see that Annie is making cabalistic signs in your direction? She evidently wants to attract your attention without our observing it."

"Mebbe I can have a word with you, sir," said Annie, in some slight confusion.

"What is it, Annie?"

"A visitor, sir."

"What mystery is this, Annie?" asked Mina. "Can it be the Right Honourable James?"

"No, mem."

"I will come, Annie," I said, and went with her towards the lodge. We were hardly beyond hearing distance when she turned to me with the eager joy of one who has amazing news to impart.

"The Duchess!" said she.

"What?"

"Her Grace and none other."

I hastened into the parlour, and there found, sure enough, my grandmother. She was looking out of the window; and when I entered she turned and enclosed me in her suffocating embrace.

"This is a surprise indeed," I said, repressing a tendency to gasp for breath.

"A natural surprise," she answered, "for I expected to find you resisting murderous attacks from without and hysterical appeals from within. Instead of which, you seem to be giving little tea-parties on the heather."

She had turned from me, and was gazing with more than slight curiosity at the figures of Mina and Wilhelm. He was bending over her in a very lover-like attitude.

"That is the Princess, I suppose," she observed; "but who——"

"Oh, dear no," I interposed hastily. "That is the Princess's companion — an English governess."

"Oh, indeed. And who is that good-looking, though, to my mind, unprepossessing young man?"

"Oh, that—that is the Count's son."

She turned quickly and her face cleared.

"The Count's son? I had no idea the Count

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had sent you re-inforcements. I am relieved to hear it. I might have guessed he would not have left you to struggle alone. I suppose these two are the custodians of the Princess? A most sensible arrangement. But where is the Princess?"

"Oh, about somewhere."

"You don't find it necessary to keep her under very strict watch?"

"Oh, no."

"Is she quite safe from the advances of the adventurer?"

"Oh, yes."

"He is not forcing himself on her, then?"

"Oh, no."

"That's good. Things seem to be going very pleasantly. I feared you might be having trouble, and so I thought I would pay you a visit. I heard from the Count the other day, and he complained that you did not give him very full information."

"Why, hang it," I exclaimed, feeling wronged, "I tell him everything--though, indeed, there is not much to tell."

"It is curious he never mentioned his son was with you."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her the facts, but I abstained from several reasons. It was difficult to explain that the Count's son was himself the wicked adventurer, and then

at the same time to account for his presence as a friend of the family. And secondly, the Count had himself kept from her this information, and I was entitled to assume he did not want her to know. In any case, it was not her affair.

"It's very kind of you to come so far," I said after a pause, which I found embarrassing. "I had no notion——"

"You have heard of the Duke's illness?"

"Which Duke? There seem so many," I added apologetically.

"I mean my son. He has had a collapse, and the doctors advised a yachting cruise. Of course, a mother's place is by her son's side—even on the sea—if it isn't rough, anyhow. We touched at Oban, and I determined to run over and see you. I was not a little anxious about you, Oswald."

"There is really no cause," I said.

"So I perceive, and I am glad. As a matter of fact, I intended to suggest that you and the Princess should join us on the yacht. Is it practical?"

"There is Mina—Miss Dobson, I mean."

"That nice-looking girl? Mina! Oho!" She looked at me with keenly searching eyes.

"She is engaged to Wilhelm," I said, hastily, reddening as usual.

"I suppose by Wilhelm you mean the Count's son. A good job, too. I feared that perhaps——" She did not finish her sentence. "I don't want you to marry a governess, Oswald," she went on. "Perhaps we can do better for you than that later on. I'll see to your matrimonial ventures."

"Thank you very much." I could hardly choose that moment to define a grandmother's duties, but I made a mental resolution to make their boundary line extremely clear when the necessity arose.

"I did not anticipate you were such a large party," the Duchess continued, "and I cannot extend a general invitation without speaking to the steward. Our accommodation is not very great. But I'll see."

"Oh, please don't trouble," I said quickly. "I am afraid it is quite impossible, though, of course, it would have been delightful. You see, Mina and Wilhelm are getting married shortly, and — and it would upset their plans."

The Duchess was not greatly interested in the love affairs of the Count's son and an unknown governess. "I should like to see the Princess," she remarked.

"I am afraid she is not in," I said apologetically. "She went off early this morning, and she hasn't turned up."

"Alone?"

"Young Tom, the gilly's son, is with her, I think."

She stared at me. "You all seem remarkably remiss. How do you know she is not philandering with this German adventurer?"

"There is no fear of that," I answered with a superior smile.

"I do hope you are not being deceived," said the Duchess earnestly. "There is something rather queer about this."

"You need have no alarm. I take full responsibility," I replied, grandly.

"Well, I won't meddle. The Count's son, his fiancée, and yourself ought to be able to look after one young woman. By the way, you haven't fallen in love with her?"

I laughed. "Oh, no, you would not ask that question if you knew her."

"What, is she unattractive?"

"Oh, no, she's a very nice girl, but I can't imagine any one falling in love with her. She's quite young."

"Youth in the female is not usually a barrier to love."

"Oh, but she's only a tomboy—a regular hoyden, and yet rather nice—so frank and open."

"I should like to see her. I must try and come over again."

"Won't you have some tea? If you care to come outside——"

"No, no. I must be getting back."

I did not press the point, for I was not anxious to introduce Wilhelm to her.

"I hope the Count will soon be able to get back," I said, "and then I shall be rid of this business."

"I hear the Grand Duke is still in a very critical state, but there is hope."

"I am glad of that."

"Good-bye, Oswald. Oh, by the way, I have been looking through your mother's papers. It is very curious——" She stopped suddenly.

"What is curious?" I asked.

She looked at me searchingly. "Did your mother ever hint that——"

"What?"

"Well, never mind." She paused for a moment. "Is there nothing she said which dwells in your thoughts—nothing you are continually pondering over and wondering at? Tell me frankly, Oswald."

"Why, no," I answered, in bewilderment.

She seemed disappointed, and at the same time relieved. "There are allusions in some of my son's letters I cannot understand. I have sent the letters to Mr. Parsons. I dare-

say they mean nothing, but I am glad I did not burn them."

"Allusions to what?" I asked with some curiosity.

"I will tell you another time." She embraced me. "Good-bye again. Be a good boy. What a nice sun-burnt face you have! Oh, your poor father's eyes haunt me when I look at you. Good-bye, good-bye. My victoria is in the yard. Don't bother to come with me. Oh, my dear, dear lad!" She kissed me again, and there were tears on her cheeks.

I saw her to her conveyance, and then went to find the coachman. He was in the kitchen, listening to Annie on the MacCuddie incident. I hastened him away. When the Duchess's vehicle had rolled out of sight, I went back slowly to Mina and Wilhelm. For a single moment I imagined that Mina welcomed my return with relief, but I told myself I was mistaken. It was only her desire to make me feel at ease. Shortly afterwards Wilhelm took his departure, and Mina and I watched him disappear on his bicycle down the road the Duchess had taken half an hour before.

Suddenly Mina clutched my arm. "Oh, Oswald," she cried—and I thought there was something like terror in her voice—"there is less than one week more!"

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Terror ? I knew I must be wrong. I had mistaken ecstasy for fear. I looked at the sky.

"I trust you will have a fine day for the ceremony," I said, stiffly.

Mina dropped my arm and went silently into the house.

CHAPTER XV

A FINAL APPEAL

THE days slipped quickly by. Mina made several journeys to Oban, and many parcels were delivered at the lodge. She spent most of her time in altering the contents of these packages to her liking. It is always a mystery to me why women will spend fabulous sums in purchasing hats and bonnets, and will then strip them of every vestige of their finery and rebuild the structure from the very groundwork. As the days went by my wretchedness increased, and the gravity on Mina's face deepened.

She was to be married on the following Thursday morning. It had been arranged that Wilhelm should call for her at eleven in the morning, and drive her to Dalavich. As soon as the ceremony was concluded, he was to return to the lodge to obtain the promised reward, in the form of a cheque, handing me

in exchange the certificate of marriage. She would go on to Oban, and await his return. I was grateful that I was to be spared the pain of seeing her as Wilhelm's wife.

"But what about the Princess?" I asked Wilhelm, when he informed me of these arrangements. "Who is to tell her?"

"As I shall be pressed for time, I thought perhaps you would kindly do so."

I shrank from the task. "I am afraid there will be an unpleasant scene," I said.

"Bless me, why should there be?" Wilhelm asked.

I was astonished. "She has every right to consider herself betrayed, hasn't she? One can hardly expect her to take the news quietly."

He laughed. "Dobbs won't care a couple of pins."

"Not care!" I cried.

"Her remarkable fund of sterling common-sense will come to her aid," he said more gravely.

I said no more, but I felt sorely puzzled. Apart from the Princess's indifference to Wilhelm's want of attention, what greatly surprised me was Mina's callousness. She seemed to harbour no regrets or scruples, and yet she was proposing to commit an act which from every point of view was dishon-

ourable. Wilhelm was engaged to be married to her friend, a young girl who had fled from her home at his suggestion. And yet Mina, who, in every other respect, was the embodiment of womanly tenderness, seemed quite indifferent to the slight she was inflicting on one whose very youth and inexperience cried to her for protection. I tried to satisfy myself with the explanation that Mina was actuated by a clear-eyed regard for the Princess's best interests, that she realized that such a marriage must end in sorrow and unhappiness because there was no real love on either side ; perhaps she felt that the suffering of the Princess, if she suffered at all, would only be fleeting. And yet—how could Mina ? How could she bring herself to act with such duplicity ? I found myself following Mina's movements with a sorrowful perplexity, which, no doubt, mirrored itself on my face.

"Don't !" cried Mina to me one day, when we happened to be alone.

"Don't what ?"

"Don't say nothing and look everything. Do you know you are beginning to distress me ?"

"I am sure I am very sorry," I murmured.

There was a great heap of dress material on the table ; she pushed it from her impatiently and rose. "How close it is in here !"

She flung open the window. The light breeze ruffled the tendrils of hair on her forehead. "Honestly, what do you think of my conduct?" she asked, without turning.

"I try not to think of it."

She laughed in a way that jarred. "I know you despise me. I hate to be despised. I hate to think you despise me."

I was up in arms in defence of herself against her own implied strictures.

"You have done nothing wrong," I said hotly. "You are doing right. You are protecting the Princess from herself."

"And you are trying to find excuses for me." She glanced towards me, and her eyes were wonderfully soft and tender. "Ah, Oswald, when you know everything, what will you say?"

"What do you mean? What is it I do not know?"

She was silent for a moment. "I am not marrying Wilhelm to protect Dobbs."

"You mean," I said, with a jealous pang, "you are marrying him because you love him?"

She sighed. "I sometimes fear I haven't even that excuse. Sometimes I think I am marrying him because I am a strong-willed, obstinate woman, who cannot bear to depart from a course she has decided upon."

"Do you mean you have always aimed at this—this conquest?" I asked with scorn.

"It seems the only way," she answered wearily, "the only escape from irksomeness, from restrictions, from narrowness. I think that is why I have decided upon it."

"Your reasons are monstrous," I cried.

She did not appear to hear me. "And now that I am pledged," she went on, "I must go on, and the future must take care of itself."

I tried to feel disgusted, but somehow I could not. I felt this frank confession should alienate me, but it did not. And soon I was engaged in my usual occupation of spinning excuses for her. A poor governess, fighting with poverty, humiliated by the thousand pettinesses and miseries of a subordinate position for which her temperament entirely unfitted her, was it so very blameworthy on her part to seek a way of escape? It was natural enough her head should be turned at the notion of marrying a nobleman's son. And yet surely this was not Mina's character.

There was something that did not fit.

On the evening before her marriage day, I decided to make one last appeal. I persuaded myself it was my duty to do so. She should never say that I permitted her to enter a life-long thralldom with-

out every effort on my part to avert the tragedy. I worked myself into a passion of righteous anger, and then tried to calm myself by dwelling on the necessity of an imperturbable demeanour. My plan was to place the whole facts clear and coldly before her, not permitting a single note of passion to creep in, excluding rigorously the feeling I bore towards her. She should never even suspect I loved her! In a few incisive and well-chosen words I would bring before her the certain misery of her future life, if she persisted in her mistaken course. The force of my appeal must produce an impression on her mind, shaken as it already was by doubt and anxiety. Surely she would listen to me, and if she would only listen, the conclusive nature of my arguments must persuade her, even at this the eleventh hour, to repel Wilhelm with horror and scorn. Perhaps, even, when she heard my eloquent pleading, she would break down, and sobbing weakly, cling to me, the strong man, for support and protection. A thrill ran through me at the thought. I saw myself smoothing her hair with a caressing hand, and whispering soothing words into her ear, while her body shook with sobs, born of relief for her narrow escape.

The whole of that Wednesday, Wilhelm

had been with us. I prowled about looking for an opening which never seemed to come. How I hated Wilhelm that day! A feeling of restlessness pervaded us all; even the Princess was unaccountably excited. Awkward silences and uneasy talk had filled up the time, which seemed to linger. At last, after supper, Wilhelm had started homewards, and Mina had volunteered to accompany him a little way on his road. Here at length was my chance. When they had been gone some time, I went down the road slowly in order to meet Mina as she came back. Twilight had settled on the moorlands—a twilight that never deepened into darkness during these short summer nights. I walked cautiously, for I did not want to meet Mina till Wilhelm was well on his road.

At length I found her. She was sitting on a boulder by the wayside, her face bent forward and hidden in her hands. She was alone, and her attitude denoted utter sadness. I was glad to see her in this mood, for it indicated that she realized the seriousness of her position.

She did not hear me till I had come close to her, and had touched her gently on the shoulder. She had flung a shawl over her head when she had gone out, and it had fallen off. I picked it up.

"You will catch cold," I said.

"Is it you, Oswald? I feared it was Wilhelm who had come back. You startled me."

"I came out to meet you. The road is so lonely."

"Thank you." She made no movement to rise.

"Besides, I have something to say to you."

"Please don't say it."

I was offended. "What do you mean?" I said huffily.

She smiled. "I have noticed all day you have been working yourself up for a final appeal. Your face reflects every thought. Dear Oswald, how I wish you had that keen perception which obviates useless effort!"

I was considerably taken aback. "Nevertheless, I must say what I have to say," I responded at length.

She shook her head in a forlorn kind of way. "Have you ever studied my face?"

"I have sometimes glanced at it," I answered, doing more than that at the moment, for her clear-cut profile showed like a fine cameo against the darkening moors.

"My chin, Oswald! What do you deduce from that? Ah, if you would only study my chin, how many unpleasant conversations we might avoid!"

I was at a loss. "I hope you are not being funny," I returned, in an aggrieved voice. "You know my views on young girls who strive after facetiousness."

"I am not joking. I don't feel in the least like being funny. Ah, no, I don't expect to be light-hearted for many a long day. But what I mean is, that it is absurd to make appeals to a woman with a determined chin."

"I don't observe anything remarkable about your chin," I said. "Certainly nothing which would prevent me speaking to you as a man of the world should speak to a young, inexperienced girl, without a mother, in a position of considerable difficulty, who contemplates a step which must lead her to a life-long unhappiness." I took breath after this long sentence, and felt I was doing very well. How sweet she looked in the deepening twilight! Oh, Mina, Mina, I love you!

"Dear lad," said she, "how I wish I were your mother! I have said that before, I know, but the thought comes to me every time you speak."

"I do not intend to allow myself to be annoyed by anything you say, however offensive," I replied crossly.

"I did not mean to say anything offensive."

"It is offensive to continually reiterate that you want to be my mother," I cried, with sudden heat. "I can conceive nothing more offensive. You are younger than I am, and you persist in treating me as your junior."

"Ah, don't let us quarrel," she made answer. "It is my last night here."

"Your last night! Ah, Mina——"

"Don't spoil it," she cried almost passionately. "Let us forget everything horrible."

"Your marriage is horrible! You admit it!"

"I admit nothing," she answered, in haste.

"You don't love him, M'na. Perhaps he may ill-treat you."

"No man will ever dare to ill-treat me." There was a sudden flash in her eyes.

"Give him up, Mina."

"Not another word, Oswald." There was something in her tone that made me pause.

"Tell me why not. Only tell me why not," I pleaded, conscious of a nervous tremor in my voice. This was not the kind of interview I had planned.

She seemed to ponder my question. "Because," she replied at length, "because I have nowhere to go except to him."

"Have you no home?"

"Ah, no, it is closed against me. It is

Wilhelm or solitariness. And I fear solitude."

"Then come to me." I did not mean to say these words, but they came from me almost without my consent. "Mina, Mina, I love you dearly. If you marry him, you will break my heart. Come to me, Mina, for I love you."

"Hush, hush," she breathed.

I sank by her side and seized her hands.

"Dearest, look at me. Why do you keep your dear eyes turned away? Ah, Mina, how I have longed to tell you this."

"Let go my hands, Oswald, dear."

"Can you love me? Ah, that's impossible, I know. But don't marry a man you don't love. Let me have my chance of winning you. Perhaps in time you might learn to love me. But give up this horrible marriage. If only for my sake, give it up. It frightens and distresses me. I can't bear to think of it. Mina, dearest——"

"Please let go my hands."

I let go one and held the other. She sat still and gazed into the dimness.

"I can't tell in words how I love you, Mina. I can't say what I want to say. But I want to devote myself to you for all my life. I want to take care of you, and keep pain and sorrow at bay for you. Ah, let me do that,

Mina. Don't tear yourself away from me, and go where I may not follow you, into a world of suffering and distress, perhaps even of ignominy. Don't think I am asking too much. I won't ask you to love me ; I will only ask to be allowed to love you, and to protect you. Don't take that right from me."

She drew away her hand.

"I am sorry for you, Oswald," she said softly. "I guessed in a way you rather—liked me. But I never—Oh, Oswald, how could you be so silly?" There was a tender maternal solicitude in her tone. "However, you will get over it very quickly. You mustn't let it hurt you. Believe me, I am not worthy of your love. Your honest heart would turn away in sorrow and surprise if you knew everything. Dear, dear Oswald, how sorry I am!"

"You don't care for me?"

"Yes, I do. I think I love you."

My heart leapt. My arms went out, but she evaded them.

"Mina! Mina!"

"Not in that way. As a sister. Ah, not perhaps quite as a sister. As a mother——" My arms dropped to my sides. "Well, not perhaps quite as a mother. But not as you wish. Besides, it is impossible, so utterly impossible, that if you only knew you would

laugh. Oh, no, you would not laugh, but you would not marry me."

"Nothing would prevent me doing that, if you would only consent."

She scanned me thoughtfully. "Yes, your sense of honour would prevent you."

"I do not understand."

"I don't want you to."

"My sense of honour! Do you mean towards Wilhelm? I consider he has no claims on you. He has acted disgracefully. If you knew everything——"

"You mean about the money you are to pay him. I do know about it. Does my knowledge shock you?"

It did shock me. I had always believed he had hidden that from her. I was silent.

"You see, Oswald, you and I are separated by a mighty gulf. You are so honourable and good. I am so deceitful and shifty. But perhaps I am not so bad as you think. The money is only borrowed. It will be repaid."

"He tells you so?" I said, with scorn.

"No, it is I who say so. But don't let us dwell on these sordid matters. Let us agree to forget all that has passed between us. After to-morrow, you and I will part, and probably we shall never meet again. But I shall often think of you, Oswald, my

brother, my more than brother. And you must not forget me, Oswald. Let me have a tiny corner in your heart."

"You don't realize that I can love only one woman in all my life," I said, perhaps a little grandly. And then the sense of my loss came upon me. "Mina, Mina," I cried, "don't leave me. I can't live without you."

"Hush, dear one." Her hand rested for one moment on my head ; and then she rose.

"How I wish this had never happened ! Come, Oswald, take me home."

But I remained with my head on the stone which had supported her, feeling that the world had no more interest for me. She lingered a moment, and I heard her sigh. Then she turned and went back alone.

CHAPTER XVI

MINA DEPARTS

"**M**INA wants her breakfast in her own room," said the Princess the next morning. "She has a headache. You don't look particularly chirpy yourself. But this place suits me, and Annie makes splendid porridge. Please pass the sugar."

I did as she requested.

"Annie says that a real Scot would rather die than take sugar with his porridge. Her husband never did. He used to take salt. I think that was horrid of him.

"Perhaps it was as well that he was shot," I said, trying to be flippant.

"Oh, by the way, that MacCuddie man is making a speech on Army Reform in Oban to-day. Annie is greatly excited; I told her she might go if she liked, and that I would look after the house for her. I feel sure I can cook." She pondered a little. "Of course, I have never tried."

It was a moment or so before I realized the significance of what she was saying.

"When will she get back?" I asked.

"Oh, not till to-morrow evening. She is to stay the night with her husband's sister's niece, who married the gamekeeper on the Inveragle estate, a most suitable match, which gave great satisfaction to the family." The Princess helped herself to a trout of her own catching.

"She can't go," I said briefly.

"I told her she might."

"You had no right to tell her that."

"Well, she asked me to ask you, and I said I would fix it up for her. Do let the poor thing go and listen to her husband's murderer on Army Reform. I am sure he is qualified to speak on musketry practice."

"No, no, quite impossible." I could not explain that Annie would be wanted at home to chaperon the Princess that night.

"Well, well," said the Princess resignedly, "I shall have to explain to her that you are a cruel and harsh man, even although you are my brother. If I were a man, I could not listen unmoved to the pleading of a gentle little sister."

She got up and began to examine with scrupulous care her book of flies.

"Where are you going to-day?" I asked.

"Loch Burn," she replied. "I shall work down towards the loch. I suppose I can't induce you to come with me?"

"No, I'm afraid not." I glanced at my watch. It was nearly ten o'clock.

"Wilhelm is driving Mina over to Oban, isn't he?" asked the Princess. "If you see Mina before she starts you might ask her to bring me back some tooth-powder."

Should I tell the Princess Mina was not coming back? Supposing I was to tell her Mina's true errand, what would be the result? Could the Princess stop this accursed marriage? I hesitated, and for a single moment determined to make the experiment. But I gave up the notion. What right had I to betray Mina?

"Oh, I nearly forgot!" cried the Princess, suddenly. "Mina asked me to make her a bouquet. Come and help me, Oswald."

I think there is a subtle joy in lacerating one's own heart. At any rate, I followed the Princess out into the little patch of garden, and watched her picking Mina's bridal bouquet. I had given up being astonished at Mina's cynical disregard of the ordinary canons of good taste. That she should have asked the girl she was ousting to choose the flowers she proposed to carry, was only in keeping with her previous conduct. For some time

I watched Dobbs moodily. She arranged the flowers tastelessly, seeming so entirely to lack the feminine gift of colour, that I felt constrained to take them from her and sort them myself.

"That's very pretty," said Dobbs critically, with her head on one side. "I am sure Mina will be very pleased." She looked at her sun-burnt hands disparagingly. "I am an awful duffer at anything like that."

"It is odd," I said. "Most women have an instinctive gift for that sort of thing."

"Well, I haven't," she answered shortly.

"I sometimes think you were intended for a boy," I observed.

She glanced at me quickly, reddening slightly. "I wish I was," she said almost defiantly. "If you only knew what a nuisance long dresses are." She kicked at hers impatiently. "Will you give Mina the flowers? I want to be off."

"Certainly not," I cried, as if I had been stung. "Take them, please."

I left her and went back to the house. Whilst Mina was still there, I felt I could not leave it for long. I wanted to see her once more before she went out of my life for ever, and so I hung miserably about the passage, waiting for her to descend the stairs. Yet when at last I heard the door of her bedroom

open, I fled hastily into the parlour and shut the door. I would see her from the window; that must be all. To speak to her again would only cause me fresh pain. I heard her step on the stairs, and then the parlour door opened and she entered.

"I did not know you were here," she said, and flushed. She was dressed in a plain white dress, and her hat matched her dress. She seemed very sweet and gentle. "And yet I am glad I have found you. I should not have liked to go without saying good bye. You have been very kind to Dobbs and myself."

"I would rather not have spoken to you again," I said. I was annoyed with myself because my voice was hoarse. "It would have been—less painful."

The tears rose to her eyes. "I can't bear to feel that I am leaving you with pain in your heart."

"I can bear it," I answered. "You need have no compassion for me."

"Ah, yes, you will soon forget me." She held out her hand. "Good bye, Oswald."

I took her hand. "Good bye, Mina."

Her eyes looked into mine. In their clear depths there was an indefinable grief.

"Don't forget me too soon," she whispered.

"I shall never forget you. If you are in trouble, you will let me know."

She shook her head slightly. The noise of wheels made her look out of the window.

"Wilhelm has come. I must go."

I raised her hand to my lips. "May God protect you," I said brokenly.

At the door she turned suddenly. "Oswald, Oswald, it hurts me to leave you like this," she cried, almost wildly. "I wish things were different. I wish—I wish—I had the right to stay and comfort you. Ah, I ought not to say that. I only mean that I wish you were really my brother."

"If you were indeed my sister," I said grimly, "I would keep you from that man, by force, if necessary."

She frowned slightly. I had struck a jarring note. Any hint of constraint seemed to anger her. She went out without another word.

Through the window, I saw Wilhelm greet her; I saw her refuse his aid, and step unassisted into the dog-cart. Dobbs flung the bunch of flowers into her lap. Wilhelm picked up the reins, and they drove away. I flung myself into a chair and covered my face with my hands.

I sat plunged in the completest misery for over an hour, and then I roused myself,

full of the resolve to get rid of the entanglements of this unhappy business. By this time my task was performed. The Princess was safe. All that I had now to do was to induce her to return to her home. Wilhelm would soon be back for his cheque, and then would come the breaking of the truth to the Princess. I supposed there would be a scene, but I hardly anticipated much trouble. The Princess's indifference to Wilhelm, except as a comrade, was so marked, that I presumed her ready acquiescence in any course proposed to her. After the first outbreak of womanly pique, I felt convinced she would not refuse my escort back to Cassel. Once she was off my hands, I was free to plan my future as I pleased.

The sun was shining brilliantly. The whole world seemed in a holiday mood. I passed Annie, who looked at me reproachfully, and her eyes were red. Let her weep! She was not the only one who had troubles to confront. I walked away from the lodge aimlessly, telling myself how solitary the place was without Mina. My only consolation was that I had succeeded in my mission. Wilhelm's power for evil, so far as the Princess was concerned, was at an end. That was something, at any rate. Whatever private grief I had to hide away in my heart, success

was mine in the undertaking that had been imposed upon me.

As I wandered down the road past the scene of my last night's interview with Mina, I hardly noticed a trap passing me, although a vehicle on the moorland road was not common; but I heard my name. I raised my head to find it was the postman who was addressing me.

"I've a letter for you, Mr. Chapman," said he. "Your friend didn't call at the office this morning as usual, so I've just brought it myself."

"What friend?" I asked.

"The dark gentleman with the bicycle." He was fumbling in his bag.

"Did he call for my letters?"

"Every morning. You see, we don't deliver up here till late in the day, and he said you wanted your letters as early as possible."

I took the letter he handed me, and thanked him. It was news to me that Wilhelm called daily for my letters. I had found them on the breakfast table, and it had never occurred to me to enquire how they came there. The knowledge that Wilhelm had concerned himself so kindly on my behalf caused me to feel uneasy.

I sat down by the roadside and opened

the letter, which bore a German stamp and the Cassel postmark.

"Dear Oswald," it began, "I am greatly pleased with the bold and skilful way you are encountering the difficulties that beset you. It is true the accident to Wilhelm has greatly assisted you" (what accident?) "but Providence is usually on the side of those that help themselves. A compound fracture ought to give him his quietus, at any rate until I can be with you. It was a master stroke on your part not to inform the Princess, and to leave her to wonder at his remissness. But are you sure he will not get someone to carry a message? Remember, he is as crafty as the devil, or his father."

This was Greek to me. I turned to the name at the end to find it was the Count's. But the writing was entirely different from that of all the other letters I had received from him.

"You will forgive my fear, shown perhaps too clearly in my last letter, that the accident might have been a carefully contrived scheme to throw you off your guard. But your assurance in answer that you yourself were present when the leg was put into splints, and that the doctor is an acquaintance of your own, has removed my apprehensions. I am not, therefore, hurrying to Scotland as

was at one time my intention. You will see, will you not, that Wilhelm gets skilled attention? I should not like him to be lamed for life. You will wonder at my solicitude, but paternal affection dies hard."

What did all this mean? Astonishment began to give way to consternation.

"The Grand Duke is still in a critical state, although I am beginning to hope. He is anxious to have his son here. You must arrange to send the lad home at once. I realize the awkwardness of leaving the Princess alone with you, but what is to be done? The boy must be here. I feel sure, when you tell him of his father's anxiety to see him and of his father's dangerous state, he will come readily, for he is a well conditioned boy. Perhaps you may be able to induce the Princess to accompany him. You may give her my assurance that no compulsion will be placed upon her—as far, at any rate, as her marriage with the Duke of Hanau is concerned. Between ourselves, the Duke declines to marry her after what has occurred. Telegraph me when to expect Carl."

And then followed the Count's signature.

For some minutes I sat absolutely dazed. What did it mean? Had I been deceived after all? I had never informed the Count that Wilhelm had broken his leg. I had

mentioned his approaching marriage to Mina, and the Count had replied warmly approving the proposed match, and had urged me to press it forward by every means in my power. Someone had evidently been communicating with the Count in my name. I jumped to my feet. If the Count had received forged letters purporting to come from me, then in all probability I, too, had been the recipient of forgeries also! It struck me suddenly that the Count had never had an opportunity of seeing my handwriting, just as I had never seen his. How easily the envelopes might have been opened and the contents changed! I rushed towards the lodge.

"Annie, Annie!" I shouted.

She came out of the house in a hurry, potato skins dropping from her apron.

"What is it?" she cried. "Has anyone been shot?"

"Who posted my letters?"

"Your letters? Dugald McCree takes them to the post office at Dalavich."

"Did you give them to him yourself?"

"No; the young leddy, Miss Dobbs, would always take them to Dugald."

I turned giddy. The Princess was also a confederate in the plot against me. Perhaps she was married to Wilhelm by this time.

Perhaps the dog-cart had waited round the bend for her to join it. Perhaps Mina had never intended to marry Wilhelm—my heart gave a sudden leap. Perhaps—perhaps—Oh, they were all in the conspiracy together, and I had been tricked and cheated all along the line!

Was it too late to save the Princess? I glanced at my watch. The marriage was to have taken place at twelve, and it was now long past that hour. Too late! Too late!

And yet, perhaps, my surmise was wrong. The Princess had said she was going to fish in the loch. I could solve the question that way. The loch was not more than a mile away. I turned and ran.

CHAPTER XVII

A DISCOVERY

THE loch rippled clear and blue at my feet, but I could see no Princess. The clouds cast their shadows on its surface, but there was no young lady angling in its depths. I felt sick and giddy. Heavens, what a fool I had been! But who could have believed that Mina, with her clear eyes and placid brow, could have connived at such duplicity? And yet I had been ready enough to believe that she was deceiving the Princess. Alas, how obvious everything had become! It was I alone who had been befooled. And even in the humiliation of this discovery I fell to my old trick of trying to find an excuse for Mina. I was the emissary of the Count, and therefore the natural enemy of the Princess. It would be in her eyes a merit rather than a crime to deceive me. Wilhelm had pretended to be in love with Mina, and Mina had pretended—only pre-

tended, thank Heaven for that!—to return his love. The Princess, for her part, had feigned to care for nothing but boyish sports, and all this elaborate scheme of make-believe was to throw dust in my eyes. How well they had acted, or, at any rate, how easily I had been gulled! I felt I must go away to some far distant spot and hide my shame. Certainly, I could never face the Count. And what would my grandmother say? Probably she would enfold me in a comprehensive embrace and bid me "not to mind, dearie."

The whole world seem to rock with derisive laughter and jeers. The rabbits mocked me before they doubled for their burrows. The flies that circled round my head buzzed with contemptuous amazement. There were nasty leers on the faces of the hillside sheep, and the sun itself, as it ducked in and out of the clouds, pitied me and wondered at my extreme simplicity.

Was Mina laughing too? I felt she was, and it was the cruellest cut of all. No doubt she would tell Wilhelm of my wild entreaty that she should give him up in my favour, and they would laugh together at my infatuation. I hate you, Mina. Really and truly I hate—no, I don't.

Wait a minute. Was there not one gleam

of gladness in my gloom? I had discovered the truth before I had parted with the money. Ah, ha, Wilhelm, my fine fellow, there is now no five thousand pounds for you, nor will there be. You and the Princess may go through a form of marriage if you please, but you'll have to starve for all that. You'll have to crawl on all fours to the Count, or earn your own living. Which will you prefer?

I thanked Heaven for this one mercy—that Wilhelm had only partly succeeded. His clever scheme had failed him at the most crucial point. If he had got the Princess, he had not got the money he wanted so badly.

Slightly comforted, I sat up on the bed of heather on which I had flung myself and my eyes fell on a human being. Glancing across the loch, I saw standing on a little rocky island some distance from the shore, silhouetted against the purple of the distant hills, the naked figure of a slim lad. He had evidently clambered out of the water with the intention of diving off. It was probably a shepherd laddie enjoying a morning dip. I watched him idly for a few minutes, and then determining that I would return to the lodge to have it out with Wilhelm, I rose quickly.

The boy had evidently not noticed me before, and after a startled moment he plunged in

apparent confusion into the water. As I turned away, I smiled at his modesty.

I had not taken more than a few steps when I stumbled over a little heap of clothing. It was with something of a shock I observed that it was composed of articles of feminine attire. I glanced round with some timidity. Certainly the bather I had observed could not have been the owner of these clothes, and there was no one else in sight.

I looked outwards. I could see the lad's head, bobbing round the corner of the rock, watching my movements. I looked at the garments at my feet. The colour of the dress attracted my attention. Somewhere or other I had seen that colour before. I looked at the dress carefully. By all that was inexplicable, it was the dress the Princess had worn that morning! That there should be no mistake I picked it up, and from its folds fell a wig of long auburn hair, the heavy plait loosely tied up with blue ribbon. The Princess's dress and the Princess's hair and presumably the Princess's under-garments! But in Heaven's name, where was the Princess? And why did she wear a wig?

I went to the edge of the loch and shouted to the lad. He took no notice, keeping out of my sight, though I saw his head bob round the corner of the island more than once. I

ordered him to come ashore, but he ignored my command, always keeping the island between him and me when I ran round the edge of the loch. I was determined to solve the mystery before leaving the spot, and so I returned to the clothing, and sitting down in front of it, waited developments.

The boy seemed to realize it was to be a trial of patience, and, probably finding the water chilly, he climbed on to the rock and lay there basking in the sun, evidently with the intention of tiring me out. Across the water, I beckoned him to come to me. I shouted that I would not hurt him. He took no notice, except, by way of answer to my expostulations, to raise his fingers to his nose and spread them in vulgar fashion.

This was too much. My patience was exhausted, and I was certain no young woman was sheltering on or behind the rock. I began to undress. This new move evidently caused the young gentleman some mental perturbation. When I plunged into the water and struck out for him, he rose and seemed to hesitate whether to flee or to surrender. However, when I reached the island, he was still there.

"All right, Oswald," he said in a conciliatory tone, "I'll come. You've fairly caught me."

"Who the blazes are you?" I asked, raising myself out of the water.

"I'm—I'm Carl."

"And the Princess—where—who is the Princess?"

He fidgeted. "Shall we go ashore?" said he. "We can talk better there."

I was still bewildered. The boy had the Princess's face and the Princess's voice, but was no Princess at all, but her brother.

"You must tell me who and where the Princess is," I ordered. "Tell me at once, and no nonsense."

"I shall tell you nothing," he answered doggedly, "though I think most intelligent people would have guessed long ago."

"Do not be impertinent," I retorted, with as much dignity as I could muster. "When you were a Princess you could say things which in a mere boy are not permissible."

"Shall we go on shore?" he asked meekly.

"When you have told me everything."

"I refuse to say anything till I am dressed."

"In woman's clothes?" I asked, with scorn.

He flushed. "I swear I shall never put on these beastly rags again. But, Oswald, do let us get on shore. The flies are worrying me horribly."

"When you have told me everything."

THE CUSTODIAN

"Never."

"You must."

"I shan't. And I am going on shore."

"Very well," I said grimly. "But let me tell you that there is a walking-stick there of a very pliable nature."

"You forget that I am the hereditary Grand Duke," he said, with hauteur.

"I remember you are no longer a Princess," I replied, with determination.

He capitulated suddenly. "Mina is the Princess," he said.

"Oh, indeed," said I blankly. Though I had guessed it, the certain knowledge came nevertheless as a shock.

"Now," said he, "shall we be getting ashore?"

"I suppose so." We swam back to the mainland in company.

"I hope you are not vexed?" he asked.

I laughed, without much mirth. "No doubt it appears an excellent joke to you."

Carl looked at me anxiously and yet triumphantly. "By this time Mina will be married. You can't do anything, you know. Why not make the best of it?"

"Why not, indeed," I replied moodily.

"It was not your fault. You couldn't have been expected to guess," he said soothingly.

"You think so?" I asked ironically, not feeling comforted in the least. Never was the son of a Grand Duke in such imminent peril of personal castigation.

"On the whole, you did very well," he said patronizingly.

I glared at him fiercely. "I advise you not to say another word until I give you leave. Put on your woman's clothes this instant. And let me tell you, Wilhelm has made a pretty muddle of his scheme, for I haven't paid him the money he expects, and don't intend to."

His face fell. "I am afraid Wilhelm will be angry."

"I don't suppose he will be pleased."

"You'll let him have some money, won't you? He's frightfully hard up."

"I'll see him damned first," I cried vindictively.

"You're not taking it at all nicely," said Carl, with disappointment.

I made no immediate answer. The sun had dried me sufficiently, and I was resuming my clothes. Carl lay on the heather and seemed in no hurry to make a move. He had donned a linen garment as some protection from the flies, but otherwise was in nature's garb.

"I ought not to have gone for a swim,"

he said penitently; "but the water did look so ripping, and I was sick of these things. The wig in particular is so hot and stuffy."

"What put that disguise into your head?"

"It was Wilhelm's notion. He suggested it originally in order to help our escape from Cassel. Mina was dressed up as an old woman. That is how we got away so easily. When Wilhelm found the Count could not come to Oban, he wired me to put on this rig again. We did not know his reason until he explained it to us later."

"The reason being to deceive me." By this time I was clothed. "Dress quickly and come along."

He shook his head. "What's the good? You know the truth now."

"Look here, my lad," I said, "you can't trapes about the Highlands in that attire. Besides, you must start for Germany without a moment's delay. Your father is critically ill, and your absence is distressing him."

"Is that true?" he asked, and his face paled.

"Yes, it is true. Did not Wilhelm tell you?"

"No." The news seemed to sober him. "If my father is ill, I must go to him at once."

"That is obvious."

"You know, don't you, I am his only son?"

"Yes."

He rose to his feet. "I will never wear these clothes again. They are—unworthy."

He made a bundle of them round a heavy stone and flung them into the lake. "And now," he said, "I am ready to go back to Germany."

"Do you propose to travel clad in a garment which I believe chose in the know call a chemise?" I asked sarcastically.

"You must go to the lodge and fetch my clothes," he answered. "You will find them in a bag in my room."

I looked at my watch. "Is there anything else you will want? You will not have time to go back to the lodge yourself, if you are to catch the afternoon express from Oban."

He thought. "No, everything I need is in my bag."

"I shall be back in half an hour," I said.

"Am I not to see Annie again, or Tom, or my ferret?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

His face fell. "I suppose it can't be helped," he said mournfully, "though I should have liked just to have said good-bye. I've had a jolly time, and you've been awfully decent, Oswald."

I hurried away, leaving him standing amongst the heather, his white garment flapping about his legs in the breeze. When I got to the lodge, I found the bag without difficulty. As I was hastening out of the house, carrying it in my hand, I encountered Annie.

"Has Mr. Wilhelm got back yet?" I asked.

"No, sir." Her reproachful glance reminded me I was doing her a grievous wrong.

"Oh, by the way, Annie," I said stopping, "I understand you want to go to Oban this afternoon."

"And that did I, sir. But it matters little what I want."

"You may go," I said shortly. "I find Miss Mina and Miss Dobbs will not be staying here to-night. There is no objection to your going to Oban."

"I'm much obliged to you, sir." Her face brightened. "Are the young ladies to hear the Right Honourable James Mac-Cuddie? I can tell them they will never regret it. And if you could yourself go and listen to him——"

"I'll see about it. How are you going?"

"Peter McCree will drive me over according to promise. And much obliged I am for the opportunity you have given me——"

I cut her short and hurried off, for my thoughts were with the heir to a European sovereignty, cooling in inadequate garb, on the breezy shores of a Highland loch.

When I got back to him, he greeted me with some impatience.

"What a time you've been! How heather does tickle!"

When he had finished his toilet, I was amazed at the transformation clothes could effect. As a Princess, he had appeared as a pleasant-faced, awkward girl. In his own garments, he was a good-looking, slim lad of rather less than medium height. I congratulated him on the change, and he flushed uncomfortably.

"Do you think it was effeminate of me to put on these things? I did not want to, but Mina said it was for her sake."

"I don't see what else you could do, if she wanted you to do it."

"Mina usually gets her own way. And so does Wilhelm. I wonder how they will get on together."

"Do you think she really cares for him?" I asked rather wistfully.

He looked up quickly. "Why otherwise should she marry him?"

"Perhaps because she feels she is without a home."

His face clouded. "Girls are so curious. Once or twice I have thought recently she did not care for Wilhelm as much as she used to."

"It's too late now, anyhow," I said sadly.

He found comfort in the thought. "Yes, it isn't any use bothering ourselves. I say, what a jolly shindy there will be when I get home. How the Count will make his monkey faces at me! I don't care. I shall tell him he ought not to try to marry my sister to a worn-out old brute who has been married dozens of times before."

"Dozens of times?"

"Well, twice, anyhow."

"What brought you to Oban," I asked.

"Mina intended to go straight to her old schoolmistress in Edinburgh. But when we got there, we found that she had given up her school and retired to Oban. We followed her, only to find she had been dead some months. We had nowhere else to go, and Oban was as good as any other place. So we stayed on there."

We had set out for the main road, with the intention of walking to Dalavich. Luckily, we met the postman on his homeward journey, and I easily arranged for the conveyance of Carl to Oban. I supplied him with ample funds for his journey

"Good bye, Dobbs," I said. "Take care of yourself."

"Right you are," he answered from his seat by the postman. "And, Oswald, just one word. Don't be hard on Wilhelm—for Mina's sake."

I felt my lips tighten. "I shan't be hard on Mina, at any rate," I made answer. For a moment I held his brown young hand in mine, and then the trap drove away. He waved his cap till he was out of sight, and then I turned to go back to the lodge, to wait for Wilhelm!

CHAPTER XVIII

A FRESH CHANCE

I WENT towards the lodge slowly and sadly, taking a short cut over the heather. As I went, I pieced out in my mind all the parts of the fraud which had gone to my deception, and I could find no excuse for myself. My credulity had been enormous. Was ever such a fool as I? Youth has its ups and downs; and I was in the downs. My soul dragged behind me in the dust.

What should I do when I met Wilhelm? At any rate, I might taunt him with the partial failure of his plans. I tried to think of bitter things to say to him, but in the polite art of *riposte*, he was more than my master. The subtlest taunt I could evolve was to offer him a bit of Annie's home-made scone to take home to his starving wife. But on reflection, this struck me as school-boyish, if not vulgar, and I rejected it, though I laughed aloud at the notion, for it pleased me to think of Mina

suffering. But the next moment my mood changed, and my heart was full to bursting with pity for her, while my brain was afire with wild schemes of pursuit and rescue in true melodramatic fashion.

I walked with my eyes bent on the ground, and had almost reached the lodge before I noticed that a female figure was leaning over the swinging gate. The sun was in my eyes, but surely I could not be mistaken. The blood surged to my head. I stopped short, and stared. What had brought Mina back? Ah, Wilhelm had sent her for the cheque! Perhaps he had found out that I knew everything, and trusted to her pleading. My face grew hard, and I came forward slowly.

"Well, Oswald, I'm back again," she said.

"I did not know you intended to come back. I thought Wilhelm——"

Her face was pale and thoughtful. "I did not intend to come back, but I could do nothing else."

"What do you mean? Where is Wilhelm?"

"He will be here soon. He is scouring the country on his bicycle."

"Is that how he proposes to spend his honeymoon? I think he might have hired a tandem."

"I don't cycle," she said, coldly.

"In that case, I think he too might have abstained. I never heard of such uncurbed enthusiasm."

She flushed. "Please spare me your wit."

"Heaven knows I have little enough to spare. Where is Wilhelm?"

She plucked a sprig of honeysuckle and smelt it. "He is looking for a minister," she observed, examining the flower very closely.

"A minister! Aren't you—aren't you——"

"No, I'm not," she answered, with more than a suspicion of tartness.

"Not—not married?"

"I have already said so. Why do you make me repeat myself? Try not to be stupid."

My heart was beating, and my ears were singing. "I'm sorry that I'm stupid, but you surprise me," I managed to say meekly.

She looked thoroughly ashamed. "Isn't it a horrid anti-climax?" She would not meet my eyes.

"But why aren't you married?"

She hesitated a moment. "I suppose you will laugh, and I shall hate you, if you do. The minister at Dalavich, who was going to marry us, has got the measles. They came on suddenly, and they're very bad. Can you imagine anything so absurd? Wilhelm

started off to Kintrau on his bicycle, but the minister was away from home. He went on to Kitmelfort, but the minister there had two funerals on hand which he declined to postpone. I think that was so unreasonable of him, as if funerals could possibly matter! Wilhelm has now gone on to Oban to arrange for us to be married to-morrow morning."

I stared at her without speaking for some moments. "You're not married!" I repeated slowly and with difficulty.

"No." She gazed at the distant horizon.

I took off my cap. "Thank God."

For a single instant her eyes met mine, and the blood crept slowly over her face. "The reprieve is not a long one," she said in a low voice.

"Who can say how long?"

"Only till to-morrow."

"Only till to-morrow!" I echoed.

She looked at me a little strangely, and then turned and went into the house. I followed her.

"Where is Annie?" she asked.

I told her that Annie had received permission to go out. She glanced at the clock.

"Four o'clock! Isn't Dobbs back yet? Who gave you your lunch?"

"I haven't had any lunch. I didn't want any."

"I haven't had any, either," she observed. "Shall we have high tea? I am very hungry. Very likely Dobbs and Wilhelm will be back by the time it's ready. If they are not, we'll have it together. You won't mind?"

"No," I answered. "I don't think I shall mind."

Again our eyes met, and for some reason we averted them in confusion.

"You go outside and smoke," she said, with a pretence of lightness. "Men are terribly in the way when meals have to be got ready."

"Well," I said, "I wan't to go down to McCree's cottage."

"Don't be long. I've only got to boil the kettle."

The knowledge that she was the Princess Isa had changed her in my eyes. I realized that, Wilhelm or no Wilhelm, she had passed beyond my reach. But the recognition of this fact filled me with a stronger determination than ever to keep her from Wilhelm. If she was unattainable by a nameless orphan, she should be equally unattainable by an unprincipled adventurer. I was influenced less by the determination to fulfil my mission than by a bitter, unreasoning jealousy of Wilhelm.

At the cottage I found only Tommy.

"Where's your father?"

"He's awa'."

"Where?"

"In the toon."

"What town?"

"Oban."

"Look here, Tommy, I've a telegram I want to send off at once. What's the nearest telegraph office?"

"At Dalavich."

"That's five miles. How can you get there?"

"I can wauk."

"Yes, but what time does the office close?"

"Five o'clock."

I glanced at my watch and groaned. "You can't do it in the time. Where's the pony?"

"Faither's driving the trap."

"Confound it!" Just at that moment I saw Wilhelm dismounting from his bicycle at the door of the lodge. A sudden inspiration possessed me.

"Tommy," I said, "can you bicycle?"

He grinned. "That can I."

"You are really a very good boy!" I exclaimed, with strong approval. "Do you know where Mr. Wilhelm puts his bicycle? Of course you do. In the stable behind the house. When we're at tea, just borrow it. Make as little noise as you can, because he mightn't like to lend it to you. Some

people are so unreasonable. You'll be back in less than an hour, and he'll never know. Now understand, my telegram must be sent off before five o'clock."

He was a sharp lad. I scrawled a message to the Count on a leaf of my note-book, telling him that things were critical, and that the marriage he wished to prevent would take place unless he came at once. I tore out the page, and wrapping some coins in it gave it to Tommy.

"Ride like blazes," I said, and left him.

When I returned to the lodge, I found Wilhelm and Mina already at their meal. She seemed a little downcast. Wilhelm greeted me with his usual pleasant smile.

"What a day I have had!" he observed. "It's a positive scandal that parsons are so scarce in a Christian country. I shall really have to write to the *British Weekly*."

"Did you find one after all?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, I tracked one to his lair. He is to give us his services to-morrow at twelve. Mina, I shall be here at ten sharp!"

"I shall be ready," she answered, a trifle wearily. There was no animation on her face. He eyed her keenly.

"What cursed luck we've had! I wish we could have got the business through to-day."

"Yes, indeed," she endorsed with a sigh.

"It can't be helped."

"No, it can't be helped."

Conversation flagged. We finished the meal in almost absolute silence. Then Mina rose and went out of doors, sitting down in her favourite spot on the edge of the moor. Wilhelm followed her, and so did I, for I was determined not to let her out of my sight.

"I shall always have pleasant memories of this place," Mina said dreamily, and with a glance in my direction. "On the whole, time has passed very agreeably."

Wilhelm smiled. "For my part," he said, "I shall be delighted to turn my back on it. I would rather live in the crater of Vesuvius."

"For many things," said Mina, ignoring his remark, "I should like to stay on here."

This observation did not please Wilhelm, and he smiled unamiably.

"Oswald is a remarkably pleasant companion," he said meaningly.

Mina glanced at him and flushed. "I was not alluding to Oswald," she said quietly, "although he has been extremely good to Dobbs and myself."

The pause that followed was embarrassing. Wilhelm seemed to be smiling at the end of

his cigarette, though I saw nothing amusing in Mina's remark.

"Where is Dobbs?" he asked at length.
"Do you know, Oswald?"

Did I know?

"Dobbs went fishing this morning," I said, with some hesitation. "It's not late yet."

"Oh, I don't question her ability to take care of herself. I am only sorry she should miss the opportunity of seeing me once more."

"She will no doubt bear the disappointment bravely," I said with a sudden flash of anger.

"Ah, you judge her feelings by your own. By the way, who's that on the bicycle, scorching along the road?"

Of course it was Tommy. He evidently did not see us, for he came tearing along and dismounted only a few yards away.

"It's Tommy McCree," said Mina, indifferently.

"I ought to know the look of that bicycle," cried Wilhelm, springing up. "Come here, you young rascal; where did you get that from?"

If only Tommy had not dismounted, he might have escaped, but as it was it was impossible. Wilhelm collared him. My feelings were beyond description. Were we

to have the whole matter out there and then? That was not my intention. Everything depended on Tommy not revealing the purport of his errand to Dalavich.

"I—I borrowed it, sir," whimpered Tommy. He looked at me, but I could give no sign. If he gave me away, I did not know what would happen. I have not the faculty of explaining away plausibly an awkward situation.

"Who gave you permission?" cried Wilhelm, shaking the boy violently. I could almost hear his teeth rattling.

"No—no one, sir."

I felt very mean as I stood by tongue-tied. I thought the poor lad gave me a pathetic look.

"He hasn't hurt your bicycle," said Mina, "and therefore you need not hurt him."

"I don't think that follows," said Wilhelm viciously. "Confound his impudence!" He cuffed him.

"Please don't do that!" I cried hastily. "Perhaps I ought——"

"I'll teach the young imp to take my bicycle!" cried Wilhelm, who exhibited signs of an entirely disproportionate rage. Probably the accumulated ill-humour of an exasperating day was finding vent. Tommy began to sob bitterly, more, I fancy, from a

notion that it was the artistic thing to do than in any other cause. His tears brought Mina to his rescue.

"Let the boy go," she commanded; and her eyes blazed. For a moment Wilhelm seemed inclined to resent her interference, but he dropped before hers, and his hand loosened on the lad's collar. Tommy twisted himself free.

"Tommy, go and put back the bicycle where you found it," said Mina. "I am sorry to find you are such a bad boy." Tommy wheeled the machine away.

Wilhelm approached Mina, but she turned her back on him.

"I hope you are not angry with me," he said, in his usual manner. His ill-humour had vanished suddenly.

Mina frowned. "You had not a pleasant expression on your face just now," she said. "I hope I am not fated to see it often."

"I swear you shan't," he answered gaily. "Never again, my beloved, while you live." He put his arm round her waist, and drew her close to him. I fancied she shrank from his touch.

I left them and went into the house. Shortly afterwards Wilhelm took his leave. Mina watched him out of sight, and then came towards the house. I was standing in the

porch. She turned to me suddenly, and her face was pale and working strangely.

"The doubt is on me," she whispered. "May God keep it from becoming a certainty."

I wanted to speak, but she stopped me with a gesture, and went slowly up the stairs to her own room.

CHAPTER XIX

PREPARATIONS

LONG after Mina had disappeared up the narrow staircase, I remained gazing vaguely after her, debating what to do next. On one point I had no doubts. I was convinced it was useless to pit my attenuated brain power against Wilhelm's mental alertness. I realized he was more than a match for me. Had he not out-manceuvred me from the very start? I had passed the stage when I dared hope my wits might help me. I was right back against the wall. And I thanked Heaven that there was a chance of muscle coming into play.

Wilhelm should not marry Mina without disposing of me. If he wanted to marry her, let him fight for it, and by fighting I meant a fierce encounter with clenched fists. Possibly I might have a chance in a pugilistic contest. I felt, at any rate, we should be on more equal ground.

Gradually out of the chaos of my thoughts there was evolved a clear, definite idea, to which, once formulated, I held with all the tenacity of my nature. And it was that Mina should not leave the house and Wilhelm should not enter it until the Count had come to my aid, or I was physically *hors de combat*.

No further mental efforts for me! By brute force, if need be, Mina should remain within these four walls until such time as I was relieved of my responsibilities, either by the Count's instructions or a *force majeure*. I fell to calculating the time I might have to hold the citadel. It could hardly be less than thirty-six hours, even under the most favourable conditions, which assumed that the Count received my wire on the day it was sent and started at once. It might be longer, indefinitely longer, if some evil chance delayed my message, or the Count was unable to come or send. I wondered what provisions the house contained. But what did it matter? A few days' fasting would do Mina no great harm. She had behaved very badly, and deserved some punishment. I even found myself wishing that relief might not be too hurried.

The house was not large. It was a two-storied building, and the windows on the

second-story were small, and the drop from them to the ground was considerable. I wandered round the building and scanned the upper windows, returning satisfied that Mina could not escape from them. On the ground floor, too, there were points in my favour. The windows were all fitted with heavy shutters, which I fastened and padlocked with grim satisfaction. The front and back doors I bolted and locked, putting the keys in my pocket. Mina might have the free run of the house, but I defied her to make good her escape from it. Of course, there would be Wilhelm outside ; but how could he enter without forcibly breaking in ? And I did not intend to be idle while he made the attempt.

There was only one of the lower windows without shutters, and this was the parlour casement, which opened on hinges inwards. This window was about six or seven feet from the level outside, for, as I have already stated, the house stood on rising ground. A wheelbarrow with a flowerpot on the top of it had been Dobbs' method of reaching the window when she—I mean, he—desired to converse through it. But besides its height from the ground, which was in my favour, it had a couple of heavy iron bars crossing it. No doubt the lodge was often left untenanted,

and these were precautions against the predatory tramp. Wilhelm would not be able to break in through that window, especially if I were standing within with something heavy in my hand.

I smiled to myself with a kind of savage glee. No brains were needed now, thank goodness. It required no great intellectual ability to prevent Mina going out or Wilhelm coming in. It only needed watchfulness and the exercise of physical restraint for the one and muscular repulsion for the other.

As I made a final tour, I felt a giant. My good-humour was fully restored. I was Mina's master, and Wilhelm's superior. Confidence in myself had returned, and with it, my self respect. I plumed myself on my disregard of the event. To do my best, to fight till I was felled, that was my determination. If Wilhelm gained ingress, and, overpowering me, consigned my lifeless body to the nearest dung-hill, good and well. The day was his, and I had died a hero. Mina might marry him when and how she pleased. A pleasing image of Mina weeping over my dead body flitted before my eyes, and I felicitated myself on awakening in her a true appreciation of my merits, even though rather late. Perhaps, however, I should not be *quite* dead, and as she wept, an eyelid would flutter, and I should draw a

deep breath—Ah, what rubbish one imagines in day-dreams !

But truly my resolve to keep her from Wilhelm by force was immovable. After all, what other course had I ? I was proud of my plan and valorous as to its execution, until—until I heard her step on the stair, and lo, I was a poor shaking coward again.

She came in. The twilight had fallen, and the room was in shadow.

"Why hasn't Annie lit the lamp ?" she asked.

"Annie has not come back ; in fact, she is not coming back," I said awkwardly.

She looked up quickly. "How is that ?"

"I gave her permission to go to Oban to see her relations and to hear that MacCuddie man. You see, I did not expect you to return."

"No, but there was Dobbs."

"Let me light the lamp," I said hastily. Between us, we did it. The rose-coloured shade cast its warm tint on her face. I noticed she had changed her dress and put on a pretty light-coloured evening gown.

"I suppose it didn't occur to you," she said lightly, "that a chaperon was necessary for you and Dobbs."

"No," I replied, "that did not occur to me."

She sat down at the table and took up her work. "I suppose I shall have to go and forage for supper presently."

"Let me do that," I said quickly.

She sewed placidly. "We'll make Dobbs do it when she comes in. What is the good of having a princess about the house, if you don't make her useful?" She smiled at me across the table. "We make a charmingly domesticated couple, don't we? No one would imagine that I was a bride bereft of a husband, and you a ——"

"What am I?" I asked.

"A sympathetic brother." She threaded her needle pensively. "It is our last evening together, Oswald. Won't you put away that worried, haunted look?"

"I never felt happier," I asserted, and began to laugh rather foolishly.

She looked at me queerly. "Where can Dobbs be? I am getting anxious."

"There is no need," said I.

"You know where she is?" she asked instantly.

I hesitated. My fatal lack of resource in invention made me her easy victim. "Oh, no," I said at length.

She laid down her work. "Oswald, what do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything."

"Why that guilty flush?"

"There isn't one. You are quite mistaken."

She leant across the table towards me, her earnest eyes on mine. "Where is Dobbs?"

"I don't know where he is," I responded sullenly.

"'He'!" She sank back upon her chair, and the colour faded slightly from her face. I felt like a schoolboy detected in a fraud. What a shame it was! It was she who ought to have felt like that.

"What do you know?" she asked at length.

"I know everything," I said, almost timidly.

"How did you find out?"

"I came across Dobbs bathing in the loch."

"Oh!"

Again a painful silence intervened. I felt I had committed an indelicacy. She, too, seemed embarrassed, and taking up her work became intent upon a difficult stitch.

She spoke at length. "What have you done with him?"

"I have sent him back to Germany."

She nodded. "I am glad you have done that."

I suppose ten minutes elapsed without

further remark, and then she laid down her work.

"I am going to get you some supper," she said.

"I will come and help you."

"No, I won't hear of it."

"It will be no trouble."

"You can lay the cloth and get the cutlery out of that cupboard. Now, do what I tell you. You will only cause confusion in the kitchen."

She went out of the room with a backward smile in my direction, but she did not go into the kitchen. I heard her go upstairs to her room. In less than a minute she was down again, and I heard her fumbling at the back-door. Presently the door was flung open, and she appeared with a cloak about her shoulders and a hat upon her head.

"The front and back doors are locked," she said, "and the keys are removed."

"How did you find that out?" I asked.

"I wanted to go into the garden to pick some flowers," she said.

"Is that why you have put on your new hat and that heavy cloak?"

"It gets chilly at nights," she replied.

"Ah, that explains it, of course," I observed politely.

Her eyes were bright, and her lips were

compressed. She took off her cloak and hat. I noticed that her fingers trembled.

"You don't appear to have laid the cloth," she remarked.

"You must have forgotten the supper things," I responded.

She looked me straight in the face.

"After supper we shall have a good deal to talk about," she said.

CHAPTER XX

TEMPER

WE were very polite to one another during supper. I said "Thank you very much," when she passed the butter, and if she wanted the mustard she said "If you please." Her appetite seemed excellent, but mine was of the slightest. Yet though I was terribly frightened, I clung to my resolution with the doggedness of despair.

"You may smoke," she observed graciously, when we had finished.

I thanked her, and lit a cigarette. She still sat at the table, tracing the pattern of the tablecloth with an unused fork.

"Why did you lock the doors?" she asked suddenly, without looking up.

"To keep Wilhelm out."

"But he doesn't want to come in."

"One has to be prepared for even remote contingencies."

"But why should he want to come in? For one thing, he is sleeping at Dalavich."

"I was thinking of to-morrow."

"To-morrow he will have no need to come into the house, for I shall go out to him."

I smoked on without replying, trying to regulate the puffs that I might not show the agitation I felt.

"Shall I not?" she asked impatiently. "Why don't you speak? It is rude not to reply to civil questions."

"It might be ruder to answer them."

"You mean that you will not allow me to go out to Wilhelm to-morrow? Is that what you mean?"

I gave up temporizing. "Yes," I responded briefly.

Her colour rose; her eyes sparkled; her lips tightened. Ah, I knew all the signs.

"Do you seriously mean that you will endeavour to keep me a prisoner?"

"Yes, until——"

"Until what?"

"The Count comes."

She rose so suddenly and pushed back the chair so quickly that it toppled over backwards.

"You have telegraphed to him?"

"I have."

She glowered at me—there is no other word.

"And you actually think I shall submit to this—this constraint from you—you!"

She should not have put contempt into her tone. After all, I have a temper.

"I don't ask you to permit it. I don't care whether you permit it or not. You will do what I let you do."

She drew her breath so sharply that it seemed to hiss through her teeth.

"This," she said, with some difficulty, "is impudence."

I made no answer, for I had really no answer to make. My silence irritated her.

"Answer me," she commanded.

"I didn't hear any question."

She laughed scornfully. "Wilhelm will make you speak," she said.

The conversation, it seemed to me, might reasonably terminate at this point. I picked up a newspaper.

She tapped on the table with her knuckles. "How long do you intend to keep me here?"

"Till the Count comes, or sends."

"How long will that be?"

"Not more than a few days at the most."

"Oh, indeed! And how do you intend to feed me?"

"I really have not considered these minor matters. Annie has a barrel of oatmeal. Porridge is very sustaining."

She was always unexpected. I looked for another burst of anger, but she merely laughed a little shrilly.

"What a silly fellow you are, Oswald! Oh, what a very foolish scheme!"

"It isn't a scheme. I don't scheme. I leave that to Wilhelm."

She picked up the fallen chair, and crossing the room sat down in the arm-chair.

"It was absurd of me to be angry," she said. "At the worst, you will only cause a scene. Of course, you can't keep me here against my will—against Wilhelm's will."

"I'm going to try."

"The real danger," she went on thoughtfully, "is that you will make me ridiculous." Her face became serious. "I should not like my poor little romance to degenerate into a farce. Surely you won't be so unkind, Oswald?"

"It may become a tragedy," I said, "for if Wilhelm is successful it will only be because I am no longer able to resist him."

Her lip curled. "I have always liked you, Oswald, but I have never taken you seriously."

"You may find you have made a mistake."

She smiled in a very superior fashion. "I wonder you don't try to regard the matter from a common-sense point of view. Do you really think a rough-and-tumble with

Wilhelm will help you or me? I can see you and him rolling and fighting on the floor, blacking each other's eyes, tearing each other's hair, scratching——"

"Men don't scratch," I said loftily.

"Ah, but perhaps I shall have to come to Wilhelm's aid. I have soldiers' blood in my veins. Think of us all three rolling and scratching and tearing. What a pity your hair is so short. Oswald! You won't give me a fair chance."

I could not help laughing, and she laughed in response. She made a perfect picture as she leant back in the old-fashioned arm-chair, her bare arms hanging loosely down, and the mocking light in her eyes.

"It is you who make things ridiculous," I said. "It is really no laughing matter, for I shall resist Wilhelm to the death."

She showed her pretty teeth. "What weapons will you fight with?" she asked playfully. "'Cleft by a poker' will make a capital head-line for a new paper report. Oh, Oswald, I do beg of you not to make us all supremely ridiculous."

"It is better to be ridiculous for a day than miserable for a life-time," I said oracularly.

She lay back in her chair and thought. I lit a pipe and smoked. It was half an hour before she spoke again.

"Don't—don't you care for me any more, Oswald?" she asked suddenly and very plaintively. Her eyes were closed, but she turned her face slightly in my direction.

I was silent. For one thing, the question was embarrassing in itself, and for another, I suspected a trap.

"Only last night, you told me you loved me," she went on. "Has your love flown away so quickly? Ah, Oswald, how fickle you are!"

"I am not fickle," I answered, my heart pulsing with inconvenient rapidity. "I did not know then that you were playing with me, laughing at me."

"And now that you know, my laughter has driven away your love." She shook her head sadly; there was a melancholy cadence in her voice. "It could not have been a very real love."

It was on the tip of my tongue to cry that it was such love as man had never before borne for woman; but I refrained. Her statement that she had never taken me seriously still rankled, and I would pay no more tributes to her vanity. I had given up my pipe, which I could not keep alight, and I sat staring, with my hands in my pockets, at a milk-jug. I shall always remember that milk-jug. It had a golden scroll running

round it, and a little Cupid held the two ends which met beneath the handle.

Then Mina sat up in her chair. "Oh, what shall I do!" she cried, and covering her face with her hands, began to sob. I had not expected this. It had not entered into my calculations that she would take to tears. I stared at her uneasily, fidgeting in my chair. I half rose, and then sat down again. She was actually crying; I could hear her sob even if I did not see her tears.

"D—don't cry," I implored in anguish. "It is all for the best. Don't you see I am acting in your interest? Can't you trust me?"

"What is to become of me?" she wept. "What am I to do? Where am I to go?"

"You will go back to your home," I said soothingly, "and you will soon forget Wilhelm, whom you know you do not really love."

"Yes, I do," she cried. "How dare you say that?"

"Well, you have hinted as much yourself," I said. "You know you have."

"I haven't. It isn't true. And I can't go home. They are cruel to me at home. Oh, Oswald, don't send me back there. Dear, dear Oswald, don't send me home. They will marry me to a man I hate, a man old enough to be my grandfather."

I interposed with some cheerfulness. "Oh, no, that is all off. There is no fear of that."

"How do you know?"

"The Count has written to say so."

"It is all a pretence to get me back."

"No, it isn't. The Duke of Hanau absolutely refuses to have anything more to do with you."

She removed her hands rather suddenly from her face, which was suspiciously dry.

"Oh, indeed!" she exclaimed. "That shows what wicked things they have been telling about me. I am quite sure he wouldn't have given me up unless they had been telling lies. It just proves that I cannot return to Germany."

"You ought not to assume anything of the kind," I answered, but I pushed back my chair in some perplexity.

"I simply must marry Wilhelm," she said decidedly. "There is no other alternative. You have an unreasoning dislike to Wilhelm."

"In any case, it is a *mésalliance*," I said stubbornly.

Her brow furrowed a little. "I know that," she said quite naturally. "Of course, it is a *mésalliance*; but after all, it is nothing so much out of the way. He is the only son of the most powerful nobleman in Saxe-Cassel."

"It would not be a legal marriage without your father's consent," I urged.

"That is nonsense," she said decisively, "and you know it. And if it were so, all necessary sanctions would be given, if only to prevent a scandal, once we were married. How could it be otherwise?"

"What, then, is the ground of the strong opposition to your marriage, if Wilhelm is such an eligible *parti*?" I asked, sarcastically.

"The reason," she answered, sitting up, "is the exploded superstition which exists in the Count's mind that our family is a thing apart. It is his fetish. Is my happiness to be sacrificed to an old man's foolish reverence for an obsolete notion?" She rose to her feet. "I shall marry whom I please. I shall choose my own husband, and I defy the Count."

"You cannot cut yourself adrift from the responsibilities of your rank," I said.

"Wilhelm is no far descent," she answered. "If I were proposing to marry you, it would be different."

The truth of her remark struck me rather than its brutality. I turned away, not to show the sudden pain I felt. The next moment she was on her knees at my feet.

"Forgive me, Oswald," she cried, cling-

ing to my knees. "Oh, please forgive me. I did not mean to say that. I did not even think it. Oh, Oswald, I have hurt you. How could I! How could I!"

I looked in her face, so near to mine. There were real tears on her eyelashes now.

"You did not hurt me," I said gently. "And what you said was perfectly true."

"No, no, it was not. Do you think that I don't know you are worth a hundred Wilhelms? You are true and kind and brave, Oswald. Ah, she who marries you will be a happy woman."

"Please rise," I begged, greatly distressed. I raised her to her feet. "I am afraid this is a trying night for both of us. I expect we are both over-strung, and perhaps neither of us is saying exactly what we want to say. I see clearly that we have both made mistakes, and I think mine have been more serious than yours."

She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief, and turned to me with a bright smile. I did not realize she took my words as an expression of defeat and submission.

"We have been living in the kingdom of Topseyturveydom," she said, "and you were the King. You brought me in as a stranger from outside, and you mustn't blame me if I resisted your sway."

"I hope the realities will establish themselves very quickly," I said soothingly.

"My friends call me high-spirited," she said, smiling again, though with wet eyes. "Those who are not my friends say that I am untamed. I admit I cannot bear constraint. I fled from my home to avoid it. Even a meek girl might object to the procedure you proposed. And I am not meek."

"No, that is not one of your failings," I assured her.

"Ah, Oswald," she said, almost tenderly, "I shall always realize how excellent your intentions were. The mistake you made was not to take into consideration my temperament—which after all," she added, indulgently, "was excusable enough."

"I am glad you can find an excuse for me," I answered, a little puzzled. I still did not understand she had misapprehended me.

"I shall remember these days with a good deal of pleasure," she went on, "although we have had one or two rather stormy scenes. I hope I shall see you often again."

I thanked her.

"And now good-night." She held out her hand. "If you had not told me that you had ceased to care for me, I think I should have let you kiss my hand. But, of course, you do not care to do so now."

"I never said I had ceased to love you," I answered. I held her hand, and my heart was beating.

Her colour rose. "Then you may," she said softly.

I kissed it.

"Good-night." She turned to go, and then she paused to take up the vase which contained the bouquet she had carried that morning. "I shall take this to my room," she said very sweetly, "because you arranged it for me. These flowers will remind me of your kindness in giving up your scheme."

I stared at her blankly. She was at the door before I realized what her words indicated. "I have not given up my scheme, as you call it," I said, indignantly, for I thought it was a woman's guile. "Why do you say that?"

She turned sharply.

"What?" she cried.

"There is a misunderstanding," I said coldly. "I hope it is not an intentional misunderstanding. I have not given up my scheme, as you call it. Nothing will induce me to do that."

Her face turned white. She flung the flowers, vase and all, on the floor and stamped on them furiously. I heard the cracking of crockery under her foot.

"You are a trickster!" she cried vehemently. "I hate you! I despise you! A trickster, a mere trickster!"

I was aghast, but my temper came to my aid.

"You seem to take me seriously now," I said.

"Trickster!" she gasped, pointing at me with a scornful finger.

"Go to your room at once," I commanded. She went.

CHAPTER XXI

A RESTLESS NIGHT

I MADE the arm-chair in the sitting-room my bed that night, and, keeping myself awake with many pipes, sat waiting what the night might bring forth. Mina's room was exactly overhead, and I could hear her moving about. She seemed to be pacing restlessly to and fro, and I judged her mental perturbation had not calmed down. I wondered what she would decide to do. Would there be a nocturnal scene? Perhaps she would descend in the dead of night on the chance of capturing the keys from me while I slept. I hoped she would go to her bed like a decent and well-conducted princess, without attempting to perpetrate any foolish prank. It flashed suddenly across my mind that she might make a rope of her bedclothes (I had heard of such attempts) and squeezing herself through her attic casement seek to lower herself into the garden. If she tried to do

this she would probably break her neck, and the very idea flung me into a cold sweat. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that the window was high and small, and even if she reached it by means of a chair on her dressing-table, she would stick in the orifice. I went to the parlour window, and opening the casement peered out. The light from her window made a white patch on the flower beds, and there was certainly no one attempting to squeeze through. I was comforted, and watched with fascination the little square of light. At length it vanished, and at the same time the pacing overhead ceased. She had presumably gone to bed, and I trusted that this might be regarded as a sign of submission to things as they were.

Notwithstanding my resolve not to sleep, I fell from time to time into a half slumber, from which I would start to listen intently. Once I tiptoed up the stair to the door of her room, but no sound within gave me ground for alarm ; and I returned to my chair. The nights at that time of the year were short, yet it seemed long before the crow of a cock betokened the approach of dawn.

With that welcome signal, I flung open the window and let in the fresh air, which revived me not a little. I drew a chair close, and watched the sky lightening. I wondered

what I should be saying or doing at sunrise the next day. Should I be sleeping peacefully in my bed, with my troubles at an end, or should I still be vigilantly holding the fortress? In the latter case, there would be Wilhelm to count upon. His resources of ingenuity I must be prepared to meet! His mental arsenal was equipped with all manner of cunning devices, while my poor armoury afforded but the single weapon of physical resistance. At any rate, he should not dupe me again. Surely by this time I was proof against words, spoken or written; for I knew by painful experience that the former might be false and the latter forged. Nothing he could say or do should persuade me to let Mina go—nothing except a force which overwhelmed me and left me bound or unconscious. If the Count came, I would hand over my commission to him thankfully and obey his orders, but to no one else.

I was in a feverish state of excitement, for the period of waiting tried me severely. The sun rose in the heavens, but it rose far too slowly to please me. I wanted something to happen—I wanted someone to come and fight me. It would have been a relief if Mina had appeared to renew the wordy duel of the day before. The brief dawn was succeeded by a glorious day, yet nothing hap-

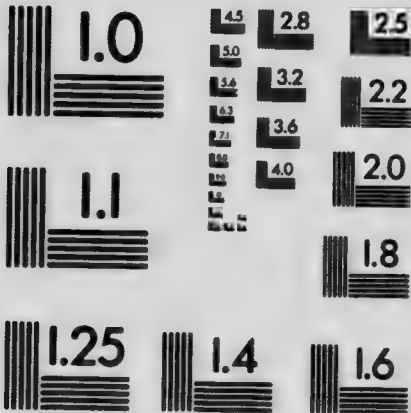
pened. Smoke began to curl upwards from the cottage chimney down the hill, but nothing occurred to relieve the tension. I saw McCree start for his morning work with his dog at his heels, and soon after Tom emerged to fill pails at the pump, but that was all. At five o'clock, the desire for breakfast arose within me, and with it the remembrance that the Princess had to be provided for. It was with satisfaction I realized that I had something to occupy my mind and hands.

I went to the kitchen, stumbling over unfamiliar utensils. What would Mina like? Would she like porridge to start with, followed by some eggs carefully poached, and rashers of bacon still frizzling from the pan? I had never poached an egg or frizzled bacon, but it could not be a difficult process. In the first place, I assumed a fire was necessary, and with great eagerness I started to light it. It was more difficult than I anticipated, and I soon came to the conclusion that I was not a born firelighter. It took many newspapers and half the stock of kindling wood to achieve my end. To make a kettle boil quickly requires art, but without art much can be achieved with care and patience. At seven o'clock the fire was blazing and the kettle was boiling, but long ere this I had myself



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breakfasted on the remains of yesterday's supper and butter-milk. The Princess must, of course, have tea. My attempt to poach eggs resulted in a sticky mess on the hearth-rug, and my porridge was a lumpy gruel. I have never understood why the rashers curled up in melancholy fashion in the frying-pan and smelt of burning. However, I made some really excellent tea, and by dint of experiments on a number of eggs I hit at last upon the right time for boiling. I made some toast, which was easy. Anyone can make toast, for one can always scrape off the cinders with a knife.

On a tray, then, I placed a tea-pot, a cup and saucer, an egg and a pile of buttered toast. I did not forget the milk, and Mina did not take sugar. Not every one would have remembered the salt and the egg-spoon. I opened the casement in the parlour and plucked a rose that tapped upon it. It was pink, and the morning dew was on it. I laid it lovingly on the white napkin I had spread over the tray. How sweet it looked! Would Mina understand it bore a message from me? Would she realize it meant I loved her dearly, and was cruel only to be kind? Perhaps she would guess—perhaps her heart would soften just a little.

I bore my tray upstairs and tapped timidly

at her bedroom door. I could hear her moving within, but there was no answer.

I tapped again. "I have brought you your breakfast," I ventured timidly.

She answered me this time. "I want no breakfast. How dare you! Take it away."

Was ever there so ungracious a response to an act so kindly meant? I stood with the tray in my hands. The buttered toast was fragrant in my nostrils. Even at this moment of dejection I realized that my own breakfast had been inadequate, and that her curt refusal might have its compensations.

But as I stood in doubt whether to accept my repulse or to try once again, the key was turned in the lock, and the door opened a few inches. Mina looked forth.

"I wonder you have the impudence to knock at my door," she said.

"How could I tell you didn't want breakfast?" I asked her in an injured tone. "You usually take rather a large breakfast."

"I shall not bandy words with you," she said haughtily. "Wilhelm will say all that is necessary when he comes."

"Very well," I responded meekly.

She opened the door a few more inches. Her eyes travelled over the contents of the tray I carried. _Honestly, I think she smelt the toast.

"Who made that?" she asked, indicating it.

"I did," I answered proudly.

She sniffed scornfully. "What is it?" she asked.

"Why, toast of course."

"Don't you know the difference between scorched bread and toast?"

"No," I admitted, rather crestfallen.

She put her arm through the opening of the door, and lifting the lid of the tea-pot looked in contemptuously. Then she touched the egg.

"Quite cold," she observed with weary scorn. There was also a note of triumph in her voice.

"I am sorry. Shall I take it away?"

"Do you imagine, after the way that I have been treated, I can have an appetite?"

"I hoped that perhaps you could."

She picked up the rose absently and smelt it, and then laid it down quickly.

"Lay the tray down on the ground," she said. "It is not in the least likely that I shall touch it."

And on this she shut the door decisively. I did as I was bid, though rather rebelliously, for it seemed a monstrous waste to leave unconsumed so appetizing a meal. The fragrance of the buttered toast followed me

downstairs. I returned in less than two minutes, to replace it with some slices of bread and butter, and behold, the tray had disappeared. I retired, somewhat astonished, to make toast for myself, for buttered toast I was determined to have.

CHAPTER XXII

THE ENCOUNTER

THE morning wore on, and the impending struggle could not be long delayed. I made a final round and tested every lock and every bolt, and shook the iron bars which guarded the parlour window. Not long after, I heard Mina's step on the stair, and I picked up the *Scotsman* of the day before and buried myself in its pages.

Mina entered the room with an affectation of light-heartedness—she was humming a tune—and wished me "Good-morning" as if it were our first meeting.

"Good-morning," I replied, and glanced over my paper to observe that she wore her wedding-gown and carried her hat on her finger. She sat down and began to put on her gloves.

"A lovely day, isn't it?" she said brightly. "I'm so glad."

"So am I," I answered, to say something.

"I'm not superstitious," she went on, "but

one can't help recalling the saying, 'Happy the bride the sun shines on.' "

"I don't think I have heard it before," I replied, in politely conversational vein.

Her gloves seemed to require all her attention. "I hope Wilhelm won't be late," she said, in a disengaged way. "And I do hope nothing will have happened to our Oban minister."

To these remarks I had no response to make. So I resumed my perusal of the paper.

"Won't you pick me a bouquet to-day?" she asked after a pause, smiling on me very charmingly.

I put down my paper and eyed her severely.

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter," she said, a little hastily. "And, in any case, I should prefer Wilhelm to do it."

I sat in silence while she went to the mirror to pin on her hat. To do this to her satisfaction, she found it necessary to remove her gloves, which she had prematurely donned, and I deduced from this fact that she was not so self-possessed as she pretended. When she had arranged her hat to her satisfaction, she resumed her seat and sat very erectly, her hands folded in front of her. Simultaneously, we heard the sound of wheels. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes shone.

"Wilhelm, at last!" she exclaimed.

I said nothing, and pretended to be reading. There was a ring and a knock.

"Wilhelm is at the door," she said.

I took no notice. Her colour rose higher, and she came swiftly to my side.

"There is still time, Oswald—still time," she murmured, and her hand rested lightly on my shoulder. "Go and open the door, and I will forget all that is past, and regard you again as a dear, dear brother."

I maintained a dogged silence. Her voice took a higher pitch.

"I order you to open the door. You shall not treat me as a child. Open the door, or I shall be forced to call Wilhelm."

I looked at her gravely. How beautiful she was! Her eyes met mine, and suddenly dropped. The bell continued to peal. She hesitated for a moment, and then, before I guessed her intention, she sprang to the window and flung open the casement.

"Wilhelm!" she called loudly. "Wilhelm!"

I was at her side in a moment, but I could not close the window without using violence, for she placed her hands on the frame and held fast. She glanced at me defiantly over her shoulder, and her look dared me to touch her.

Wilhelm came tearing round the corner from the front entrance.

"What is the meaning of this?" he cried. "Are you all dead or only deaf?"

"I am a prisoner," cried Mina. "Oswald refuses to let me out."

"What the deuce——" he began.

I interposed. "Let me warn you, sir, that if you come within reach, I shall strike you as hard as my strength allows."

Wilhelm stood still for a moment, and seemed to ponder.

"I suppose the youngster has found out something?" he said to Mina.

"He has found out everything," she replied briefly. "And he has been most insolent——"

"And Dobbs—what's become of her?" posed.

has gone back to Germany," said
"Oswald's treatment of me——"

"Kindly let me close the window," I said.

She seized hold of the iron bars and held tenaciously. "Do not dare to touch me," she cried passionately.

Wilhelm stood passively, seemingly lost in thought.

"Mina," he said suddenly, "are there any other facts I ought to know? I cannot take

steps till I know everything. How did he find out? What has he done?"

Mina told him incoherently how the truth had come out, and that I had telegraphed to the Count. I stood by biting my lips with impatience, but quite at a loss how to end the conversation.

"The Count cannot possibly arrive to-night," said Wilhelm, thoughtfully. "At the earliest, he won't be here before to-morrow. It's all right, Mina, we have plenty of time."

"Oswald has behaved shamefully," cried Mina. "He has no right to keep me here against my will. Make him open the door, Wilhelm. He has the keys in his pocket."

Wilhelm looked up at me with an evil gleam in his eyes, but said nothing. He turned on his heel, and scrutinized the windows on that side of the house. Then he turned the corner and disappeared. I should have felt more at ease if he had raved a little. A few imprecations would have given me a sense of security. His quick grasp of the situation and his silent meditations alarmed me by the sense they gave of a reserved strength.

As soon as he had gone, Mina released her hold of the iron bars, and I closed the casement. She sank into the arm-chair and burst into dry, angry sobs, which distorted her face

unpleasantly. "I hate you," she kept saying. "I hate—hate—hate you."

I sat down by the table feeling ill at ease, but I can conscientiously say my resolve never weakened. I wanted to hit Wilhelm full in the face with my fist. This was the one controlling desire I was conscious of.

"I hate—hate—hate you," Mina continued to gasp.

"Don't repeat yourself so often," I said, with asperity. "I will take it for granted."

"I hate—hate——"

"For Heaven's sake, stop that!" I cried, irritably. "Surely you have enough courage to take things quietly."

"I hate—hate—hate you," she reiterated.

I gave up expostulating, and fell to wondering what Wilhelm was doing on the other side of the hall. I had opened the parlour door, but there was no sound of any attempt at entry. I ran upstairs to view the situation from my bedroom window, and greatly to my surprise, saw Wilhelm walking slowly in the direction of McCree's cottage. What assistance could he expect to get there?

It was not more than half an hour before Wilhelm again made his presence felt, although the interval seemed much longer. I heard him moving outside, and the next moment the casement was burst open with a great shatter-

ing of glass. He had discovered a long pole—the stripped trunk of a fir-tree—and, using it as a battering ram, had broken the fastenings off the hinges. The frame hung limply inwards on one hinge.

Mina shrieked at the crash, and I sprang forward, but Wilhelm was beyond my reach.

“Mina!” he called.

“Yes, yes, I am here,” she cried.

“I can get you out of the house if you do exactly what I tell you. I can break open the door leading to the kitchen if you will draw back the bolts at the top and bottom. The lock is old and flimsy. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes,” cried Mina.

“Go and pull back the bolts.”

I seized hold of her wrist. “You will do nothing of the kind,” I said.

“How dare you touch me! Let go my arm. You are hurting me.”

She wrestled with me, and a poignant feeling of shame swept over me. I let go her wrist, and sprang to the parlour door. Unfortunately it had no key in its lock. I was on the horns of a dilemma. If I let Mina leave the room, I must accompany her, or she would pull back the bolts of the door. If I went with her, Wilhelm would probably, with the aid of the fir pole, wrench off the bars that guarded the parlour window and so

effect an entrance. It seemed essential that Mina should remain in the parlour. I put my back to the door.

Mina had ceased sobbing, probably because she had now some cause for tears. I could see the red marks my fingers had made on her soft arm.

"I am very sorry," I said unhappily. "I do hope I have not hurt you much. I beg your pardon."

"If you are sorry, you will let me pass," she said

"No, I cannot let you pass."

She stood confronting me for some moments in absolute silence. And then Wilhelm's face appeared at the window. He had evidently climbed up on the flower-pot, superimposed on the wheelbarrow.

"Stand aside, Mina," he said, "and let me argue with this chivalrous young gentleman."

Mina turned towards him, and gave a sudden cry, and the reason was only too apparent to me, for Wilhelm held a sporting rifle in his hand.

"I found this useful weapon in McCree's cottage, where, I understand, it has remained since the Right Hon. James MacCuddie's first and last deer-stalking expedition. I mention its history to convince you of its efficacy."

"Oh, be very careful," besought Mina.

"I shall be most careful," returned Wilhelm. "If Oswald will act with ordinary commonsense, there will be no need for Annie to hang his portrait by the side of her late lamented husband."

Mina became greatly agitated, and ran across to the window.

"You won't shoot, Wilhelm," she implored. "Promise me, you won't shoot." She caught hold of the gun and tried to take it from him in a way that made me thrill with terror.

"It will not be Oswald who is shot, if you are not careful," said Wilhelm, warningly. "Let go the barrel, Mina, if you value your life."

She shrank back white and terrified. I leant back against the door eyeing the muzzle of the rifle which he raised to his shoulder.

"Stand away from that door," he commanded. "Let Mina pass out, or take the consequences."

I stretched out my arms and took a grip of the woodwork on either side of the door. Wilhelm lowered his rifle.

"I am not in jest," he said grimly. "I will show you that I am not."

He levelled the rifle and pulled the trigger. The noise in that small room was deafening, and the place was filled with smoke. Chips of wood and plaster fell at my feet, for the

bullet had lodged about a foot above my head.

"You have killed him!" screamed Mina.

"Oh, my God! if you have killed him!"

I am glad to think I had not moved, though in common honesty I must admit I had seen he was not aiming at me when he fired.

"I did not intend to hit you," said Wilhelm, "but next time you will not escape so lightly. I hope you understand I am in dead earnest."

"I shall not let the Princess leave this room," I said sullenly. "You can shoot me if you like. You are a liar and a swindler. Why shouldn't you be a murderer also?"

"I don't want to hurt you," said Wilhelm. "I certainly don't intend to kill you. But I swear that unless you stand aside and let the Princess pass out, I will give you cause to remember me."

I made no further reply. There really did not seem anything to say. I set my teeth, and waited with my eyes on Wilhelm. Just for a second I glanced towards Mina. She had sunk on her knees, and was hiding her face in her hands.

"Have you made your choice?" asked Wilhelm.

"Do your worst," I said. "I am not afraid. Shoot if you dare."

"Very well," he said. He raised the rifle quickly and fired. I felt this time as if a red-hot iron had pierced the palm of my outstretched hand, and my arm fell to my side. With an effort I raised it. The bullet had passed right through the palm and was imbedded in the door behind. I looked, with something like curiosity, at the clean-cut hole bored through the centre of my hand. It seemed so strange and impossible. And then the blood came, and a pain shot up my arm. I turned giddy and sick. Blood dripped to the floor. Mina heard or saw it, and gave a horrified cry.

"Push him aside, Mina," said Wilhelm. "He will not try to prevent you going out."

She rose and approached me; her eyes seemed fixed with terror.

"You are bleeding," she whispered. "He has shot you!"

My knees were weakening under me. I sank down very slowly and gently.

"You can't get out yet," I said. "He must shoot again."

"Again!" she shrieked. "Ah, not again!" She rushed between Wilhelm and myself, and flung out her arms as if to protect me from more bullets.

"Mina," said Wilhelm, angrily, "don't be foolish. I am not going to shoot again."

There is no need. Push him aside, or step over him."

"No, you can't go out," I said, and propped myself up against the door. My hand was bleeding freely, and I tried to staunch the flow of blood with my handkerchief. Mina ran to me, and sank on her knees by my side.

"Oswald, Oswald, I never meant this."

"I do not blame you," I said.

She tried to assist me with the bandage I was twisting round my hand, but her fingers trembled so, she rather hindered than helped.

"Come, Mina," cried Wilhelm, impatiently, "a truce to this folly. Oswald is not seriously hurt. Are you coming with me or not?"

She looked up almost as if she had forgotten his presence.

"No, Wilhelm," she said, "I shall not go with you now."

"What do you mean?" he cried savagely.

"I shall not go with you now," she repeated. Her face was pale and drawn. "I cannot leave Oswald to bleed to death alone. I know he will die. And I love him very dearly."

"You love him!" shouted Wilhelm. "Do you know what you are saying?"

"I think I have loved him for a long time," she said dreamily, "but I did not know it till you shot him. It doesn't matter much my

saying so, as he is dying. Oh dear, oh dear, I think I am going to faint."

And she fainted in the quietest and gentlest manner possible, with her head resting on my boot.

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE DUCHESS INTERVENES

I WAS staring at Mina and then at Wilhelm in a dazed, half uncomprehending way, and Wilhelm was cursing in a manner altogether shocking, when a fresh voice broke upon our ears.

"May I ask what you are doing at the top of that flower-pot with a gun?" said the voice, which was vaguely familiar.

Wilhelm turned. "Who are you, madam, and what the devil do you want?"

"I have already indicated what I want to know. What are you doing with that gun?"

"I cannot see that it is any business of yours."

"Perhaps I am unjustifiably curious." I suddenly became conscious that I was listening to the Duchess. "But you must acknowledge that to point fire-arms through a window into the interior of a dwelling-house needs some explanation. And, besides, the

house belongs to me. So you see, I have some right to make inquiries on the point."

"There is a mad animal in the room," said Wilhelm. "I advise you, madam, to go away at once."

"What kind of animal?" queried my grandmother. "Surely not a mad bull?"

"No, madam. A puppy with the distemper."

"If you will kindly descend, I should like a peep."

"Go away, go away," said Wilhelm, irritably.

"I insist on seeing for myself who or what is in that room. Unless you descend, I shall wheel the barrow away from the window, and the consequences to you will be disastrous."

I think the indomitable old lady was as good as her word, for Wilhelm suddenly disappeared. I heard sounds as of scuffling, and my grandmother's voice crying "Robert!" After an interval, a man's face appeared at the window. It disappeared as suddenly as it had come.

"Oh, your Grace," I heard him exclaim, "there are two dead corpses on the floor."

I was abstractedly contemplating a far-away world, but I found strength to speak.

"It's all right, we're not dead," I managed to murmur.

"It's Oswald's voice!" my grandmother exclaimed. "Help me up, Robert; help me up this very moment."

"I fear this flower-pot will not bear your Grace," said Robert.

"I shall risk it," replied my dear grandmother. "Be prepared to catch me if I fall."

And then my grandmother's face appeared on the other side of the bars, which she grasped to steady herself.

"Oh, Oswald, what is the meaning of this terrible business? And who is that young person?"

"The Princess," I said in a husky whisper.

"Is she dead?"

"Oh, no," I assured her. Mina, as if to answer for herself, showed signs of consciousness.

"You have been protecting her with your life," said the Duchess. "I see it all! Oswald, my dear, brave, noble boy, how can I get at you?"

"The keys are in my pocket," I answered. "I think perhaps I can stand. The dizziness is passing away. I am not very much hurt."

Mina, too, began to stir. She opened her eyes. "What has happened? Where am I? Oh, I remember! You are not dead, Oswald?"

"Not in the least," I responded, with alacrity.

"But you are dying, aren't you?"

"Certainly not."

"Who is that old lady at the window, Oswald?"

"The Duchess of Pendleton. Perhaps I ought to introduce you. The Princess Isa of Saxe-Cassel—the Duchess of Pendleton."

Mina bowed mechanically.

"I decline to stay here any longer," cried the Duchess. "I insist upon being permitted to enter. Is there no one else in the house?"

"No," I replied, "but I will open the door for you." I staggered to my feet. Mina, too, rose, and we supported one another. "Will you take the keys out of my left pocket, Mina? Thank you. Please give them to the Duchess, and we will go and pull back the bolts."

We tottered together out of the room, and in a few minutes the Duchess and Robert, who turned out to be her Grace's coachman, entered. In less time than it takes to write it, I was deposited on a couch and Robert was despatched for a doctor. And when an hour later the doctor arrived and had bound up my hand, and had insisted on putting me to bed on the ground of my high tempera-

ture, I felt, save for a throbbing pain and a sense of weakness, little the worse for my wound.

"And now," said the Duchess to Mina, when the doctor had left, "while Oswald enjoys a refreshing sleep, you will come with me to another room and tell me everything. Everything, my dear; do you understand?"

"I want to ask Mina something," I said.

"Ask what you like, my boy," said the Duchess, gently.

"But I don't want you to hear."

The Duchess drew herself up. "I don't like secrets," said she. However, she moved away.

"Mina," I whispered, when she came and bent over me, "Mina, I can't prevent you going away now. Are you going away, Mina?"

She burst into tears. "How cruel of you to ask me that!"

"Don't cry, dear. I—didn't know, and I couldn't bear to think——"

"I shall never see Wilhelm again willingly," said Mina, drying her eyes. "I promise you that, Oswald."

"Thank you." Her hand was on my pillow, and I turned my head and kissed it. She reddened, and glanced guiltily round to see if the Duchess was looking, as of course she was.

"I must go now," said Mina, hastily. The expression on the Duchess' face seemed to indicate that it was high time. But as Mina went out of the room she glanced back and smiled, and the look in her dear eyes remained with me to comfort me.

The Duchess now came and patted my pillow and smoothed the coverlet in a proprietary fashion.

"If you were well enough to be questioned," she remarked, "I should ask you why you deceived me the last time I was here."

"I never deceived you."

She regarded me sadly, and shook her head. "The Princess was only the Princess's companion then."

"It was I who was deceived," I said, a little wearily, as I think the Duchess noticed.

"Well, it doesn't matter." She bent over the bed and kissed me. "Sleep, my dear boy, and get well quickly, for I have much to hear and much to tell."

As she went out of the room, I called her back.

"What has become of Wilhelm?" I asked.

"Wilhelm? Who is he? Do you mean the ruffianly young man with the gun who you once told me was the Count's son?"

"He is the Count's son."

With an effort the Duchess restrained her curiosity. "He drove off when I called Robert, and I haven't seen him since."

"If he comes back, please wake me at once."

The Duchess left the room without making any promise, and I fell into a peaceful slumber.

When I awoke, Annie had returned, for she came repeatedly into my room on pretended errands, her face alight with a joyful wonder. She moved on tip-toe, with her finger to her lips, but I knew that one sentence from me would awaken an avalanche of words. I pretended to be asleep, till Mina peeped in, when I admitted my wakefulness. The next moment I heard the Duchess ascending the stairs. It is not the privilege of every young man to have so many tender and solicitous nurses. I did not like to be ungrateful, but I could not help meditating that three nurses in one small bedroom were a little trying to the invalid.

"I think," I said, after responding dutifully to three cheerful smiles, "I should like to get up."

But my nurses would not hear of this. They put the notion aside with little laughs of scorn.

"Then, may I have something to eat, please?" I said. It was five in the afternoon and my breakfast in the evening morning

had been of the slightest. My nurses were loud in self-reproaches, for it appeared that the necessity of feeding me had not occurred to any of them. The two younger women rushed to the lower regions. The Duchess remained.

"The Princess has told me everything," she said. "She admits she has not behaved quite nicely."

"You must not believe anything she says against herself," I replied. "She had every excuse."

"I like her," said my grandmother abruptly, "even though I blame her. And if I am not mistaken, you like her too."

I felt that I reddened.

"It makes little difference what my feelings are," I said bitterly. "I cannot aspire to the hand of a Princess."

The Duchess regarded me thoughtfully. "Well, well," said she, at length, "this world is a strange place, full of ups and downs." She changed the subject suddenly. "The Count has telegraphed he will be here tomorrow."

"Does the Princess know?"

"Oh, yes."

I moved restlessly. "She doesn't want to go away, does she?"

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The Duchess pursed her lips. "If I may judge from signs, it would take a good deal to induce her to go away."

The entrance of Annie with a tray put a stop to our conversation. I spent the rest of the day with a Duchess on one side of my bed and a Princess on the other. I could have dispensed with the Duchess.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE END

SOME days later a party of four sat together on the edge of the moor just outside the lodge. There was my grandmother in a wicker chair which groaned audibly under her weight ; the Count was also there, and he occupied the parlour arm-chair, in which he sat in a tortuous attitude, with his legs intertwined. Mina and I completed the party, but we had to be satisfied with canvas stools. Annie made fitful appearances with the appliances for afternoon tea. The day was hot, and the Duchess fanned herself vigorously with a newspaper.

"I must return to-morrow," observed the Count. "I came in haste, but I intend to return more leisurely."

The Duchess sighed. "We have had two or three pleasant days, Count. But I, too,

ought to be with my son. He is still in the yacht, and he must be weary of Oban Bay."

"I am sorry to hear of his illness," said the Count. "It is sad for one so young——"

The Duchess ceased fanning herself for a moment. "Poor Pendleton was never young," she said. "But I cannot realize that he is likely to pass away before his mother." She laid down the sock she was knitting—I knew for whom, for she had measured my foot with a piece of string—and felt for her handkerchief. "It was he who sent me here, for he insisted on Oswald being brought to him. So Oswald must come with me tomorrow."

I felt flattered. It was certainly kind of the Duke to desire to make my acquaintance. At the same time, whether I desired to go with my grandmother or not depended on circumstances.

"That disposes of three of us," remarked the Count, "but I think we are four."

Mina flushed a little, but went on with the silk tie she was knitting—I knew for whom, for she had asked what was my favourite colour.

"If the Princess will accompany us——" began the Duchess. My spirits rose high.

"A delightful suggestion," cried the Count, with an alacrity which was almost indecent.

"I shall be charmed, dear Duchess," said Mina demurely. Did her eyes meet mine? If they did, it was only for a moment.

Suddenly the Count, who, by the way, was the only one of the party facing the narrow strip of road which ran through the heather—made a convulsive movement in his chair. It appeared, for a moment, as if he was about to execute a somersault; but he contented himself with a violent shifting of position, and a clutching of one foot with both hands, very much as if he intended to carry it to his mouth.

"Yet, before the Princess Isa"—he hardly ever spoke to her direct, and never addressed her by her pet name of Mina—"accepts your kind invitation, it will only be honest on my part to give her the message her father sends. He let go his foot and gripped his knees, once with each hand. "The Grand Duke withdraws his objection to his daughter's marriage with my unworthy son. Having regard to the painful scandals which her unexplained absence has created, he feels sure that she cannot now do better than marry Wilhelm. Every one will admit she cannot do worse. The Grand Duke, therefore, not only withdraws all objections, but insists, absolutely, on the marriage taking place at once."

My grandmother made an exclamation which sounded like an expletive. I felt as

every drop of blood in my veins had rushed to my head. Mina went on placidly with her work.

"What do you say, Mina?" asked the Duchess with a note of anxiety in her voice.

Mina paused for a moment to make sure she had not dropped a stitch. "I wouldn't marry the Count's horrid son," she said in a matter-of-fact tone, "if I had to be burned at the stake for refusing."

"Why?" cried the Count, with seeming fury. "Why?"

"Just because." This was the only reason she would give. She smiled pensively to herself as she continued her work.

The Count shut both eyes and leant back in his chair. "I observe," he said, "a man approaching on a bicycle. What can he want? I hope he brings good news; I have an anxious temperament."

We turned and looked. It was Wilhelm coming towards us.

The Duchess began to fan herself with more vigour. Mina went on with her knitting. I came to the conclusion that apoplexy was not a pleasant death.

Wilhelm leaned his bicycle against the hedge with care. I think he dusted the back wheel with his cap, and then, with an easy step, he sauntered towards us.

"Warm, isn't it?" he observed. "And how are you, my father?"

"Excellently well, my son," replied the Count, still with his eyes closed.

Wilhelm bowed to the Duchess, smiled on Mina, and nodded to me.

"I have run across," he said, "to hear what you all have to say to me."

The Count opened his eyes. "For my part," he answered, after careful consideration, "I do not think I have anything to say."

"And Oswald?" asked Wilhelm politely, turning to me.

I could not speak. I shook my head.

"Surely you have not forgotten your promise," he said reproachfully.

"What promise?" asked the Duchess sharply.

"Oswald promised me five thousand pounds if I gave up the Princess. I have decided to give up the Princess."

I gasped feebly. Mina went on knitting. From her manner, she might have been alone on the deserted moorland.

"And why have you decided to give up the Princess?" the Count inquired, subduing something that sounded like a chuckle.

"Because," replied Wilhelm, "she confessed her affections had alighted on this young gentleman." He indicated me.

The Count frowned. "Why do you lie so pointlessly?" he said sharply, for the first time exhibiting anger.

"I never lie pointlessly," responded Wilhelm, "and in this particular case I am telling you the truth. Ask her yourself."

"Is it true?" demanded the Count, turning almost fiercely on Mina.

"Quite true," replied Mina placidly.

A spasm passed over the Count's face, and he seemed to collapse into the recess of his chair. A tired little man, with a worn face, appeared to have taken his place.

Wilhelm went on easily. "You see, in justice to myself I could not introduce into my family circle a young person whose affections are so easily transferable."

The Count spoke at last. "I suppose," he said abruptly, "you have no money."

"I have only a few pounds," Wilhelm answered.

"I will telegraph Mr. Parson to pay you one hundred pounds on application.

"A hundred pounds!"

"Your allowance will be resumed," continued the Count. "But it will be remitted to a bank in Johannesburg, to be paid monthly on personal application only."

"Really, your proposals do not err on the side of generosity," expostulated Wilhelm.

"Now, go," said the Count. Wilhelm hesitated, but the Count's steady gaze seemed to disconcert him; and after a moment, he turned and moved away. None of us spoke until he had mounted his bicycle and disappeared out of sight. The Count sat with his chin on his chest, his face twitching almost convulsively. Then the Duchess rose.

"I think it is getting chilly," she said, and moved in her stately way towards the house. Mina rose to follow her, but as she passed the Count's chair he seized her arm in his bony fingers.

"You leave with me to-morrow for Germany," he directed.

Mina did not reply, but she looked towards me.

"The Princess will act as a free agent," I cried.

He let go her arm and turned his deep-set eyes on me. Mina moved away quickly towards the house, and I rose to follow her, but he stopped me with a gesture.

"Sit down," he ordered. "We must have an understanding."

I sat down reluctantly. He kept his eyes on me, eyes which could awe a bolder man than I could pretend to be.

"Are you, too, plotting against me?" he asked harshly.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Is it true the Princess loves you?"

"She says so," I answered, feeling extremely uncomfortable.

"And you love her?"

"Yes, I love her."

There was a pause. I did not venture to look at him, but I felt as if his eyes were burning me.

"I need not tell you," he said quietly, "that the Princess is the only daughter of a reigning sovereign."

"I know," I replied.

"And that you—you are a bastard, whose only income, apart from charity, is the salary I pay you."

"You are offensive," I replied hotly.

"Whether I am offensive or not, have I stated the facts?"

I hesitated for a moment. "I suppose you have," I allowed.

"And you aspire to the hand of a Princess?" he asked cuttingly.

"I have not said so," I answered. "I never even hoped until——"

"Until when?" he interrupted sharply.

"No shadow of hope ever crossed my mind until just now, when you said her father had cast her off, and her name was a by-word."

"When I said that," replied the Count, "I spoke falsely."

"Why did you do that?" I asked quickly.

"I wished to satisfy myself that the danger had passed. That is all. There is no breath of scandal against the Princess's name. I have watched over her reputation with greater solicitude than many a father would have shown for a dearly loved daughter. I have done so, not from love or liking for her, but for the sake of the name she bears."

I rose. "I admit that I can never marry the Princess. It would not be honourable for me to do so."

"Does she understand that?" he asked eagerly.

"I do not know what she understands," I answered stiffly.

"Will you make it clear to her?"

"If you desire it."

He stretched out his hand, but I ignored it. "My dear Oswald," he said, "I have done you an injustice. But you will agree with me that the less you see of the Princess the better. She must come back with me to Germany."

It was inevitable that she and I must part. I saw that clearly enough.

"I can't make her go back to Germany," I said sullenly.

"You can tell her it is her duty and your wish that she should go."

"I can advise her to go," I said with a sigh.

He also rose. "I trust you implicitly, Oswald," he said. He went a few steps towards the house and then he stopped. "I will send her to you. Make her duty clear to her."

He had not been gone more than a few minutes when Mina came slowly towards me.

"The Count says you want me, Oswald," she said.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"To say good-bye. I am going away."

Her face paled. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes."

"Is there no other way?"

"None."

She sank into a chair. "No," she said sadly, "there is no other way. I see it, too. Oh, Oswald, things are very difficult for you and me. They are worse for me than for you, for you will be able to forget."

"Never," I answered shortly.

"Ah, you say so." She smiled faintly. "But no man remembers long. For him, the world is so full of other interests. But I shall remember till I die."

"I love you, Mina," I said hoarsely. "If the suffering could be on my shoulders only, I would ask you to defy the world."

"And if you asked me," she replied simply, "I should consent. But you will not ask me, Oswald."

"No, I shall not ask you."

We sat in silence, and then I rose.

"Good-bye, dear one," I said.

"Good-bye."

I took her hand in mine and kissed it passionately.

We went into the house. In the parlour we found the Duchess and the Count.

"I hear," said the Duchess to Mina, "you have decided not to come with us."

"No, I am going back to Germany. Oswald thinks it best."

The Duchess took her hand. "Sit down, dear. And, Oswald, sit on my other side. I have something to say. Count, will you listen very attentively?"

We all sat in strained and awkward attitudes while the Duchess smiled on the circle.

"I came here," she began, "to fetch Oswald to my poor son, who is slowly dying. He was anxious to see Oswald. Can you guess why?"

None of us attempted to guess. The Duchess continued.

"Oswald, your mother had a secret. She had promised my son never to reveal it, and even after his death she considered her promise binding. Perhaps your mother was not very wise, but she acted according to her lights. Cannot you guess the secret? It was revealed to me when I went through the letters from your father to her which she had preserved. Oswald, my dearest boy, surely you can guess it!"

We stared blankly at one another.

"Then I will tell it to you," said the Duchess. "Your mother and your father were legally married. Do you understand the difference it makes? Count, Count, surely you understand?"

The Count pressed his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Oswald was your younger son, and he married, and this Oswald is his son. Ah!"

"Yes, yes," cried the Duchess, almost breathlessly.

"You have only one other son, the present Duke, and he is not married, and is—Ah!"

The silence was not broken for a long time. And then the Count frowned, and tapped the table with his knuckles.

"The marriage of a Grand Duke's daughter to an English Duke would be a *mésalliance*, unless the Duke was of blood royal."

"Such marriages are made every day," urged the Duchess.

"The difficulties are perhaps not insuperable," observed the Count, thoughtfully.

The Duchess was delighted. "Oswald, kiss me," she cried. But my uninjured hand was groping across her capacious lap for another's hand, which it found and held.

"I came alone," said the Count, almost gaily, "and I perceive that I shall return alone."

THE END.

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